

Critical Architecture: Introduction

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CRITICAL ARCHITECTURE: BETWEEN CRITICISM AND DESIGN

Critical Architecture includes papers presented at the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference held in November 2004 at The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. 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.

From the early stages of developing the conference to the numerous letters written in response, it became clear to us as organisers that the papers presented at the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference had challenged a view closely held by the architectural community in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, that the terms design and criticism should be divided – design should take place through the production of buildings, while criticism should be performed by critics who ‘judge’ buildings by writing essays. ‘Critical Architecture’ questioned this assumed division between design and criticism and proposed instead that as forms of architectural critical practice operating within an interdisciplinary context their relationship could be rethought. So what I would like to do here briefly, for purposes of clarification, is define how I understand the terms interdisciplinary and critical architecture to operate within the context of this debate.

Given the recent appropriation of the term interdisciplinarity in much of the literature concerning research in academe and higher education, where the word is now used in place of multidisciplinary, it seems important to briefly outline how an interdisciplinary approach can be distinguished from a multidisciplinary one. Long before its adoption and redefinition as part of recent research assessment and funding council terminology in the United Kingdom, the term interdisciplinary had been theorised and practiced in critical discourse.ⁱ As a term associated with a desire to produce political critique, interdisciplinary research calls into question the ideological apparatus that structures the terms and methods of specific disciplinary practices.ⁱⁱ The writings of Julia Kristeva and Homi K. Bhabha among many others make this point clear.ⁱⁱⁱ The aim of such work is to question dominant processes that seek to control intellectual and creative production, and instead generate new resistant forms and modes of knowledge and understanding. It seems to me that the need for interdisciplinary research, as I have defined it, is crucial. It does not, I argue, reflect a desire to work to existing standards, rather it is the kind of transformative activity that intellectual and creative life requires to critique and question such ‘norms’.

Architecture is a subject that includes history, theory, criticism and design as well as urban, technological, social and professional studies. As such, architecture embraces knowledge, understanding and modes of operation particular to a number of disciplines ranging from the sciences through to the arts and humanities. It may also be possible to identify architectural design as a specific discipline within the subject of architecture. Defined in this way, architecture can be described as a multidisciplinary subject. However, it is also

possible for those various disciplinary approaches brought together – or which have yet to be brought together – within architecture to exert critical pressure on one another; I would describe the moments, projects and practices where this occurs as interdisciplinary. In situations when researchers from architecture work with those from other subjects to form multidisciplinary research teams, it is only when this research aims to critique the modes of operation of those disciplines involved, that it should be described as interdisciplinary. So architecture is a multidisciplinary subject, which can operate in an interdisciplinary way.^{iv}

What of the term ‘Critical Architecture’? In 2003, when Jonathan Hill and I first talked about our ambitions for the conference, we both wished to hold an event that would stimulate a discussion concerning the relationship between criticism and design in architecture and related disciplines. The term ‘Critical Architecture’ emerged as a shorthand for critical architectural practice and as a simple way of marking a place between criticism and design in architecture. We were not aware at that time of the paper ‘Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form’ (1984) by K. Michael Hays.^v But later on Mark Dorrian brought to our discussion his interest in the post-critical. In tracking back through the key turns in this debate, it became apparent that this had been, to date, an almost entirely North American conversation. Through its publishing industry, North America has been able to export these ideas globally, but it has shown no interest in importing relevant work from elsewhere, either in terms of the post-critical debate itself, or in relation to architectural discourse more generally. Now is the time to find out how critical architecture is understood throughout the world.

But before doing so, it is worth noting the main aspects of the post-critical debate so far, and how they relate to *Critical Architecture* here, as framed in this book. In his paper, Hays argues that critical architecture is possible and operates between two poles, resisting cultural determinism on the one hand and recognising that autonomy is required for engagement on the other, the work of Mies van der Rohe is cited as an example. Many of the chapters in this volume also explore critical architecture as a form of design practice, which occupies the territory between form and culture, and others agree with Hays' aspiration, stated at the end of his article, that both architectural design and architectural criticism should be critical:

If critical architectural design is resistant and oppositional, then architectural criticism – as activity and knowledge – should be openly critical as well.^{vi}

If we turn now and look at the post-critical position, it is around 'Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting's paper, 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism',^{vii} that the debate revolves. Somol and Whiting advocate an architecture linked to 'the diagrammatic, the atmospheric and cool performance' as an alternative to the critical project which they describe as indexical, dialectical and as 'hot representation'.^{viii} Their approach is grounded in a rejection of a disciplinarity that is autonomous and a dialectic that is oppositional, as represented by the work of Hays and, also, Peter Eisenman. Given their lack of interest in social critique, it is easy to see why they reject Hays' dialectic of culture and form, but it seems strange that they are adverse to the work of Eisenman. Perhaps it is because, while Eisenman's focus on an autonomous aesthetics is close to the

Somol and Whiting project, his interest in autonomy, defined in terms of disciplinary purity, does not fit comfortably with their aspirations for an architectural design that engages with other disciplines. While many of the contributors to *Critical Architecture* diverge in opinion from much of the Somol and Whiting rhetoric, they do not in general, support Eisenman's position either. And some of the features attributed to a post-critical architecture by Somol and Whiting, namely that we should move from architecture as discipline to performance or practice, and regard the participation of users as integral to architectural production, echo with positions expressed in *Critical Architecture*. However, many authors published here, including this editor, contra Somol and Whiting, strongly believe that the social and the cultural are highly relevant aspects of architectural practice. Given the disastrous changes to the earth's climate caused by carbon dioxide emissions, along with the intensification of imperialist aggression by oil dependant nations as demand outstrips supply, it is not possible to go along with corporate capitalism in a pragmatic mode, without critique – to do so would be to support without question the inequalities that are integral aspects of this economic system.

The special issue of *Perspecta* in which Somol and Whiting's paper was published also contained articles in support of the critical architecture project. Diane Ghirardo, for example, argued that as well as believing that architectural resistance to capitalism was impossible, architectural critic and historian, Manfredo Tafuri, had also noted that there was 'an architecture which attempted to redistribute the capitalist division of labour' and that this was evident in the work of Raymond Unwin, Ernst May and Hannes Meyer among others.^{ix} While in an interview with the editors, Hays asserted that for him the term critical

derived from critical theory and could be summed up as: ‘the constant imagination, search for, and construction of alternatives [...]’ so claiming creativity and productivity for the critical and effectively neutralising the post-critical position.^x A number of articles have been published subsequently, in the *Harvard Design Review* and elsewhere, which take up various positions around the post-critical, from those who are somewhat disbelieving of the post-critical, to those who support the call by a younger generation to engage with market forces and reject theory.^{xi}

Rather oddly, given the title of this *Perspecta* issue, *Mining Autonomy*, autonomy remains one of the least explored terms of the debate. And it is really here that any interrogation of the critical in architecture needs to begin. An understanding of autonomy in terms of disciplinarity alone certainly seems inadequate, whether this is desired, as the post-critics state of Hays and Eisenman, or rejected as in the work of the post-critics themselves. The definition of so-called autonomous practice and its relation to the economy, to social and cultural relations, to aesthetics and to self-reflection needs further investigation. Essays in *Critical Architecture* by Mark Dorrian, Andrew Benjamin, David Cunningham, Kim Dovey, Hilde Heynen, Charles Rice and Jianfei Zhu rise to this challenge and in different ways explore architecture’s autonomy.

The relationship between criticism and design in terms of critical practice is another area of the debate developed here in ways that go beyond the terms of the North American discussion. If, following Raymond Geuss (in turn following Marx), critical theory can be defined in terms of self-reflectivity and the desire to change the world,^{xii} then when

criticism and design take on the task of self-reflection and evidence a desire for social change both can be described as critical (as forms of critical practice here rather than critical theory). However, criticism has a specific purpose, which is to provide a commentary (a social and historical context, a judgement, an explanation, a discriminating point of view, a response, or even a point of departure) on a cultural work – art, literature, film or architecture. If criticism is defined by a demand to give an account of a work, to evaluate it, position it – culturally and critically – then does this stop criticism from being understood in terms of critical practice? I would argue that it does not, and that criticism, if it expresses the qualities of critical theory outlined above, can be understood as a particular form of critical practice, one which always has an ‘other’ in mind. However, it is precisely at this point that disagreement often ensues, with commentators refusing to see how criticism, since it does not usually produce ‘buildings’, can be thought of in terms of design, or how design, since it does not operate through ‘writing’, can be thought of as criticism – to think the two together is to make a muddle.^{xiii} Instead I maintain that to think design and criticism together is productive, and demands that we call into question the definitions and assumptions that underpin both modes of activity.

Criticism is certainly an action; it is worth noting that the verb ‘to criticise’ is also associated with critique. While some have located critique as a sub-set of criticism – that critique is a social form of criticism – I would rather take the line of thinking adopted by David Cunningham in this volume, who notes that in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) ‘critique comes to denote a specific reflection on the essential *conditions* and *limits* of possible knowledge’. While Cunningham goes on to state that critique only

becomes self-reflective in G. W. F. Hegel's reworking of Kant, Peg Rawes has argued that it is in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that critique becomes embodied.^{xiv} Taken together these two view points allow a concept of critique to emerge – self-reflective and embodied – that comes close to practice, so bridging the split between design as a material, subjective, and embodied process, and criticism as an abstract, objective, and distanced one.

Roland Barthes's reminder that 'to *criticize* means to *call into crisis*' is also helpful to remember.^{xv} The phrase places emphasis on a particularity of criticising that can be shared by both criticism and design. And, in discussing the relationship between literature and literary criticism, Jacques Derrida has argued for the possibility of a lack of distinction between the two:

These new distinctions [between literature and literary criticism] ought to give up on the purity and linearity of frontiers. They should have a form that is both rigorous and capable of taking account of the essential possibility of contamination between all these oppositions [...]

(Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge, London: Routledge 1992, p. 52.)

I agree with Derrida's position, and suggest that we give up the frontier and cease drawing lines to separate design and criticism, that we look instead to sites of contamination –

perhaps of interdisciplinarity – for these call into question existing definitions and demand instead new forms of critical and creative work.

Critical Architecture brings together a range of this new work, which taken as a whole demonstrates what happens when criticism and design are both understood as part of an interdisciplinary field of activity.^{xvi} For the ‘Critical Architecture’ conference, each editor focused on a specific way of negotiating the relationship between criticism and design in architecture and we used these to generate the four themes, as follows:

‘Criticism/Negation/Action’ (Mark Dorrian), ‘Architecture-Writing’ (Jane Rendell), ‘Criticism by Design’ (Jonathan Hill) and ‘The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture’ (Murray Fraser). We have decided to use these four themes to structure this edited volume, using the form of a short editorial to introduce the contributions and main areas of concern within each section.

Mark Dorrian’s interest in the intellectual developments that have taken place in critical theory over the last thirty years, led him to ask how the idea of criticism in architecture should be understood today. In Section 1: ‘Criticism/Negation/Action’, chapters explore whether criticism still has pertinence or whether we have moved, as some have argued, into a ‘post-critical’ condition. Authors examine the limits of the so-called post-critical condition, the potential for new models of criticism, and the terms upon which contemporary criticism might be mounted. Section 1 investigates the adequacy of existing historical models and asks whether we need to imagine new kinds of reconfigured critical

practices. The chapters put forward suggestions for what these new practices might be like and how they integrate with questions of action.

In Section 2: ‘Architecture-Writing’, I explore new ways of writing architectural criticism. I take as my starting point discussions in art criticism concerning art-writing and examine how these have opened up possibilities for new writing practices and for rethinking the relationship between criticism and critical practice in the visual and performing arts. This debate questions objectivity and judgement, and introduces instead considerations of subjectivity, positionality, textuality and materiality in criticism and writing. The contributors explore how the potential offered by this debate influences architectural criticism and through theoretical essays, works and projects, speculate upon the relation of creative and critical practice in architecture-writing.

The history and status of the architect are interwoven with those of design, a term which comes from the Italian *disegno*, meaning drawing, suggesting both the drawing of lines on paper and the drawing forth of ideas. Jonathan Hill took this as the basis for Section 3: ‘Criticism by Design’ asking his contributors to respond to the following series of questions: What 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?

Finally in Section 4: 'The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture', Murray Fraser suggests that the term 'critical architecture' creates problems. Fraser states that critical architecture is usually understood to refer to a mode of architectural practice that opposes dominant economic and cultural strands, instead hinting at an alternative form of practice that does not reproduce prevailing values. Yet he wonders whether it would not be more useful to recognise a complex and negotiated concept of critical architecture that depends on cultural context. Contributors to Section 4 examine variations between rural, suburban and urban conditions within developed countries and how globalisation and cultural diversity influence critical discourse in architecture. In different ways, the chapters suggest, somewhat provocatively, that from a cultural perspective critical architecture is relative, a luxury enjoyed in Western countries, yet urgently needed elsewhere.

In sum *Critical Architecture* is an attempt to examine the relationship between design and criticism by placing architecture in an interdisciplinary context and considering its various activities as forms of critical practice. The volume investigates the potential of this suggestion in different ways, exploring modes of critical practice that operate in architecture through buildings, drawings, texts and actions, and bringing together not just the 'stars' of architecture, but a more diverse mix of voices, from established academics and practitioners to those currently engaged in doctoral research or setting out in art and architectural practice for the first time. The contributors come from theory and practice, from inside and outside architecture, and each one addresses the term *Critical Architecture* according to their own particular position, negotiating the relation between criticism and design in ways that vary according to specific research interests and modes of working.

As the proceedings of a conference that was organised into four strands it is of course possible to read the book in sections, but one can also look out for the themes that work across these. The discussion of autonomy has already been noted and takes place over a number of sections in *Critical Architecture*, while Walter Benjamin's writings on the experience of architecture as distraction – a potentially useful way for rethinking the role of the critical in architecture – are discussed by both Katja Grillner and Charles Rice. Artist Sharon Kivland and architectural theorist Stephen Cairns engage with a particular tense that they associate with the critical – the future anterior – what will have been, while Penelope Haralambidou and I, for example, explore the role of the enigma through allegory and psychoanalysis focusing on the production of spatial and material configurations that blend writing and drawing, criticism and design.

I feel the publication of this co-edited volume is timely for a number of reasons. First, in terms of the emerging interest in design as a form of so-called practice-based and/or practice-led research, *Critical Architecture* makes clear that design is a mode of enquiry that is capable of generating new ways of knowing and understanding the world through creative processes and the production of artefacts, but also that designers are able to offer critiques of their own mode of practice, both self-reflective and politicised. Second, and in relation to contemporary discussions concerning criticism as a form of practice, it is important to note that criticism, although it usually works through the medium of writing, can, as demonstrated here, operate through other media and although it always has an 'other' in mind, criticism can be understood as a mode of critical practice in its own right.

Finally, with respect to the current debate concerning ‘post-criticism’, I strongly argue for the possibility of criticism and design as vital forms of intellectual and creative labour, which aim to lay bare social, cultural and ethical concerns at the heart of contemporary aesthetic and spatial practice and experience today. In a world that currently remains in the grips of an unjust corporate and imperialistic capitalism, critical architecture is urgently required.

ⁱ I would like to refute the position put forward by Peter Carl that: ‘The term “interdisciplinary” comes from trying to find respect in research-driven universities [...]’. See Peter Carl, ‘Practical Wisdom and Disciplinary Knowledge’, *Architecture Research Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2005, pp. 5–8, p. 5.

ⁱⁱ This is a response to Felipe Hernández’s provocation that ‘interdisciplinary research’ might only be ‘the reserve of the wealthier schools of architecture in larger urban centres’. See Felipe Hernández, ‘The Scope of Critical Architecture’ *Architecture Research Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2005, pp. 8–9, p. 9. I argue that since the practice of interdisciplinary activity is a political necessity not a material luxury, it does not make sense to align interdisciplinary research with affluence, rather it should be understood to emerge from the desire for political critique.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Julia Kristeva, ‘Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: An Interview’, Alex Coles and Alexia Defert, (eds), *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex*, v. 2, London: Black Dog Publishing, 1997, pp. 3–21. Homi K. Bhabha has described the moment of encounter between disciplines as an ‘ambivalent movement between pedagogical and performative address’. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 163.

^{iv} For a longer discussion of this argument, see Jane Rendell, ‘Architectural Research and Disciplinarity’ *Architecture Research Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2004, pp. 141–7.

^v K. Michael Hays, ‘Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form’, *Perspecta*, vol. 21, 1981, pp. 14–29.

^{vi} Hays, ‘Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form’, p. 27.

^{vii} Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, ‘Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism’, in Michael Osman, Adam Ruedig, Matthew Seidel, and Lisa Tilney (eds), *Mining Autonomy*, a special issue of *Perspecta*, 33, 2002, pp. 72–7.

^{viii} Somol and Whiting, ‘Notes around the Doppler Effect’, p. 74.

^{ix} Diane Y. Ghirardo, 'Manfredo Tafuri and Architectural Theory in the U.S., 1970–2000', in Michael Osman, Adam Ruedig, Matthew Seidel, and Lisa Tilney (eds), *Mining Autonomy*, a special issue of *Perspecta*, 33, 2002, pp. 38–47, p. 40.

^x K. Michael Hays, Lauren Kogod and the Editors, 'Twenty Projects at the Boundaries of the Architectural Discipline examined in relation to the Historical and Contemporary Debates over Autonomy', in Michael Osman, Adam Ruedig, Matthew Seidel, and Lisa Tilney (eds), *Mining Autonomy*, a special issue of *Perspecta*, 33, 2002., pp. 54–71, p. 58.

^{xi} For a discussion that examines the relationship between critical and post-critical in terms of an intellectual genealogy see George Baird, '“Criticality” and its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 21, Fall 2004/Winter 2005. For a paper that rejects the post-critical position, see Reinhold Martin, 'Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism', *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 22, Spring/Summer 2005, pp. 104–109; and for one which supports it, see for example, Michael Speaks, *Architectural Record*, June 2005, pp. 73–5.

^{xii} Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 2.

^{xiii} See Brian Hatton's review of 'Critical Architecture', *Architecture Research Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2004, pp. 105–8 where he argues against the bringing together of criticism and design.

^{xiv} See Peg Rawes, 'Critical Practice', *Architecture Research Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2005, pp. 9–10, and David Leatherbarrow's wonderfully rich discussion of conviction and critique, *Architecture Research Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 3/4, 2004, pp. 199–202.

^{xv} Roland Barthes, 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers', [1971] in *A Roland Barthes Reader*, edited, with an introduction, by Susan Sontag, London: Vintage, 1982, pp. 378–403, p. 379.

^{xvi} Elsewhere I have termed such work 'critical spatial practice', see Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, London. I. B. Tauris, 2006. See also Jane Rendell (ed.), *Critical Architecture*, a special issue of *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 10, no. 3, June 2005.