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Five Critical Essays on The Crit

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MACHINE BOOKS

Five Critical Essays on The Crit

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Five Critical Essays will explore the general discussions affecting, inter alia, design, architecture, culture and politics. The ideological premise of the journal is to facilitate a critical engagement with ideas, and to interrogate established topics objectively. Taking a leaf out of EP Thompson's essay on New Society, the 1960s cultural review magazine, we aim to offer "hospitality to a dissenting view (as) evidence that the closure of our democratic traditions is not yet complete." Our purpose is to re-open civic debate.

Five Critical Essays will introduce a theme for each issue and recruit five writers to comment freely and openly on the subjects to generate space for a conversation and further enquiry. The conclusion of each journal will not necessarily mean a resolution. Indeed, it is intended that there will be five robust views on display and that their interventions will be a spark to further discussion.

Five Critical Essays will be an agora where genuine interpretations are proposed and where arguments that will hopefully advance the understanding of the subject are confidently proposed. We aim to provide a nuanced perspective on a variety of issues, whether exploring ethical dilemmas, interrogating contemporary arguments or challenging well-established orthodoxies.

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Foreword

Nowadays, the terms “judgement” and “discrimination” are often deemed to be purely negative phrases. Those accused of being judgemental are regularly assumed to be arrogant, closed-minded, pompous, and lacking in empathy. Those described as discriminatory are even worse as it is often taken to imply intolerance and unfair favouritism. Indeed, Article 14 of the Human Rights Act actively protects people from discrimination, and the UK’s Equality Act provides a framework of anti-discrimination legislation.

To exercise judgement and to discriminate the good from the bad is surely the essence of architectural and artistic discretion, and critical appreciation. To judge the work of others is to investigate, to interpret, compare, contrast and to reach conclusions on the basis of a knowledgeable and critical encounter. So, why do we tend to assume negative connotations of the straightforward tasks of critiquing, judgement and discrimination?

In the infamous Howlett Brown report, published 9 June 2020, into staff conduct at the Bartlett School of Architecture, the authors write of “an environment that seems to have embraced a culture of criticism and degradation of students.” Criticism itself, it seems, is now regularly interpreted as an assault rather than a constructive proposition. This pamphlet contends that the essence of judgement and discrimination should be reclaimed as positive concepts — recognised as the basis of fair critical treatment — rather than considered malevolent.

Unfortunately, suspicion of others’ motives and doubt in one’s own, often results in a failure to provide honest and truthful criticism. This goes beyond the academy. Moral cowardice affects practising architects, journalists, academics and cultural critics alike: those who prefer to praise compliance with the new orthodoxies rather than win a critically charged argument.

Inside our universities, student crits focus too little on a constructive and meaningful critique of the creative process, the object under scrutiny or the student's ability. There is additional pressure to massage the student's well-being and to avoid upset. One university offers support that "ranges from yoga sessions to professional voice coaches to build student confidence in preparation for crits."[1] One architect calls for "a kinder and gentler architectural education."[2] The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) invites students to "wind down an hour or so before going to bed in a way that suits you best. Take a bath … do gentle stretches".[3] Encouragement is a necessary part of the pedagogic process, but it ceases to be constructive when it morphs into total condescension.

Increasingly, within universities, the authority to decide on standards has been handed over to administrators and third party advocates. After all, why trust a professional who merely relies on "judgement", a word that is too easily taken to mean unconscious bias and incipient corruption? Better to hand the authority to some faceless technocrat with no skin in the game, the argument goes.

To help us become impartial and distant from our students, we have had an explosion of mediation, monitoring and training programmes to ensure that critics don't say the wrong thing. Human interactions in contemporary crits are almost scripted, with rubrics, templates, behavioural mandates, and training in the institutions' "learning culture" codes. External consultants are encouraged to report anything suspicious; third party agencies are employed to advocate for greater awareness of potential harms arising from everyday comments and professional regulatory bodies insist on uncritical compliance. As a result, critical faculties are becoming dulled, and poor performers are being over-flattered or deceived. Meanwhile, everyone's offence-taking and risk-aversion antennae are becoming ever sharper.

The five critical essays in this pamphlet tackle a range of topics relating to the critical appraisal of students' work, but all assert the need to regain our critical faculties — to see ourselves as helpful, not toxic — and to not be afraid to make fundamental critical judgement calls with informed discrimination.

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1 — McClean, D. et al, (2020) Mental health in UK architecture education: An analysis of contemporary student wellbeing, RIBA Research Grant, 17 November

2 — www.dezeen.com/2022/0719/bartlett-report-abuse-opinion-sean-griffiths/

3 — Russell, J. et al, (2021) *Study Architecture Well*, RIBA

Compulsion

Penny Lewis

There is a very strong sense that architectural education is failing: failing the profession; failing students; failing society and failing future generations. It's a mainstream position to argue that the crisis of the climate, and of politics generally, demands a complete makeover as far as education is concerned.

Back in the early 1980s, Kenneth Frampton argued that architecture no longer needed a vanguard, it required a rear guard. I feel the same way today. Architectural education in particular needs a counter-cultural group that will uphold a sense of what education is for, and fight against the growing desire to dismantle all the old ways of doing things.

In recent years, some detrimental changes have been forced upon architecture schools through a scarcity of staff and space. Other painful attacks are self-inflicted by a new generation of staff who see their role as two-fold. On the one hand, they teach the students about the discipline of designing and communicating architectural ideas in discourse with a client and a contractor. On the other hand, they uncritically lecture students about social justice, demanding that they show compassion on the questions of race, inequality and fear in the face of an apocalyptic climate crisis. In the ever-changing language of decolonisation, decarbonisation, pronouns and gendered space, all work is to be measured, not against the traditional measures of firmness, commodity and delight, but accessibility, sustainability and humility.

If there is an abuse of power taking place in architectural education today, it's not led by the old men — many of whom have a wealth of talent and experience — because they are hiding in the corners of our schools waiting to get cancelled for their wrong-think or their inappropriate language. The corrosion comes from the reformers, by changing structures with no real engagement with staff or the

profession. Power now rests with the “radical pedagogues” who imagine that you can teach the students to be radical activists, when actually, many just want to be (small “c”) conservative architects.

I now feel a great deal of sympathy and a strong sense of alignment with my former colleagues in various schools who wanted to insulate their students from the world and simply talk to them about History, Classicism and the architectural promenade. It’s not because I love the world as it was or that I’m prepared to tolerate the status quo. It’s because I think the most useful thing teachers can do is to give our students a very clear sense of what architecture is through what architects have achieved historically.

Instead, what is happening is that university departments, not to mention the RIBA and the Architects Registration Board (ARB), are arguing that we are not equipping our students to deal with the “real world.” And yet I don’t recognise this “real world”, which is a confusing place that features the inevitability of environmental disaster; a world in which inequality and injustice are everywhere as uncontested, defining characteristics.

Indeed, the “real world” seems increasingly distant from reality. While architecture schools experience issues such as funding cuts, growing teacher workloads, oversubscribed courses, grade inflation and a dumbed down curriculum, these are seldom discussed. The crisis of architectural education is supposedly rooted in our failure to decarbonise and decolonise. This apparent failure is said to have been overseen by previous generations of teachers who appear to have (in a selfish and self-interested way) thrived in a toxic culture of prejudice and bullying.

This official narrative reminds me of Walter Gropius’s statement in the first issue of *Dawn* just over a century ago. “The old forms are in ruins,” he said, “to hell with them, odious concepts! Destroy them, break them up, nothing shall remain! Break up your academies, spew out your old fogies”.

When I read that in my twenties, I found it thrilling. However, we must remember that Gropius, when he wrote those words, was experiencing the convulsions of urbanisation and industrialisation, the brutality of the First World War, the political arrival of the working class, and the flowering of the modernist sensibility.

His comments reflect a long-standing push by bourgeois society to rid itself of the remnants of the norms and traditions of the aristocracy, and they reflect the emergence of ordinary people into politics through suffrage, unions and socially democratic parties. Gropius, the architect, was giving expression to the forces for change in society.

Are those who are instigating curriculum change today, the contemporary equivalents of Gropius? Or should we question the motivations of this new generation of radical pedagogues? What is prompting this desperate race to abandon old norms? Are the discipline's leaders equipped to give shape to new foundational principles for the discipline, or are their impulses more narcissistic or nihilistic? Architectural education, like all education, is constantly subject to generational change, but radical change (like that instigated by the Bauhaus) has historically been led by those who have a clear idea of what is needed rather than by a specific passion to demolish the status quo.

Nowadays, our culture demands that we root out every remaining activity that is reminiscent of the old ways: the pin-up, the crit, the adoration of the masters, even the commitment to the idea that to build is a good thing. They must all be dragged to the dustbin of history and there must be an almighty bonfire of these vanities.

Unlearning

Ironically, there is a lot of talk about the need to repair and repurpose our buildings, but this sentiment is not applied to our teaching. Demolition is frowned upon in architecture, but pedagogical destruction is deemed okay. It is ironic because many of those who preach retrofitting, compose historical revisions with titles like "We have never been modernists." In these circles, it seems it's not

enough to reform or develop architectural education; we need to unlearn everything that we once thought to be true. Philistine destruction refers to knowledge itself.

Unlearning is the new fad. It is based on a distrust of experienced and mature educators — those who have studied their discipline and/or its practice — who dare to presume that they are somehow well-placed to educate the next generation. There has always been a tension between the old guard and young Turks but today it reflects a growing confusion about staff–student relationships, the nature of critique and what it means to be critical.

The sources of this confusion are wide-ranging, but two of the key references that often appear in new architectural publications today are the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the American author and social activist, bell hooks. Both these authors were late 20th century radicals who argued for a new way of thinking about education based on their experience of repression under military dictatorship in Brazil, and their work within the civil rights movement in the USA, respectively.

Freire, hooks and their various followers don't think of formal education as a positive experience. It is not a means by which all individuals, regardless of their economic or social background, can transcend personal conditions and benefit from the collective knowledge and achievements of mankind. Instead, they argue that formal education is a process in which we are trained by "our masters" to be complacent and unthinking. This conspiratorial theory is applied to citizens living in a modern democratic society in exactly the same way as it is applied to the oppressed living under a dictatorship.

Freire described formal education as akin to filling a jug with water: in other words, teachers have knowledge which is poured into students' heads. It is a miserable view of the teacher and a very passive assessment of the student. This understanding of teachers and students leads to the idea that teachers in general (not just specific individuals) have power over the student, and that simply by teaching what they know and understand, they are abusing that power.

The role of the teacher in education is to pass on the collective knowledge and understanding of the academy. At any moment in time, that understanding and curriculum will be different, but teachers have a professional responsibility to tell students about a wide range of thinking, not just those which address their own prejudices and interests. Some architecture schools have built a reputation for adopting one particular approach, but across the board, there is a balance. The educational framework developed over the past 100 years was arrived at by many different people of different political persuasions. Let's not demolish the structures that we have (or trash the ideas and understanding that is propping them up) until we have some clarity about the best and most appropriate methods with which to replace them.

The problematisation of staff–student relations has undermined the authority of the tutor, leading to real difficulties when it comes to assessment. Many of today's students believe that the mere act of having their work marked constitutes an abuse of power. In the discussion about UCL's "bullying culture" some activists demanded reparations for students who had failed the course on the grounds that unsympathetic staff had ruined their lives.

Similarly, many students will openly admit that they won't pursue a particular line of enquiry in an essay or a studio project because it doesn't conform to the interests of the tutor. It may be that they have learnt from experience that tutors give better marks to students who share their prejudices and passions — ever has it been thus, I suppose — but nowadays it seems more likely that students have been trained to see submissions not as learning exercises, but grade-grabs. The refusal to engage critically is not through choice, but the result of students being taught that there is only one angle to take.

The official response to important architectural questions: the housing crisis, fire-safety, disability access, etc, are frank and robust, but the discussions on race, climate and social justice are to be learned by rote. It is necessary to challenge the assumption that architectural education should be like a political awakening. We

need pushback. Staff need to encourage students to be braver and more critical … by being braver and more critical themselves.

How to think, not what to think

To be a good architect, it is not essential that one engages with a social justice agenda. Poor buildings are not created by individuals who have missed out on the ethics workshop, or because the school has failed to embed social justice training into the curriculum. It's usually because of pragmatic, real-world pressures placed on practice. It does no one any favours if we decide that good architecture is a badge that can be earned by producing a low-emission project, however unattractive.[1]

Education is a formal and societal process. We concentrate our resources in the form of teachers, books and technology so we can attain a higher level of understanding for the largest possible group of potential architects. That's what makes the process different to an apprenticeship where you are taught by one person with a specific knowledge base.

It's noticeable that many of those who have been successful in the new pedagogies don't go on to be architects; the industry is simply not idealistic enough for them. And it's notable that there is a constant pressure to redefine the boundaries of the discipline to spread out into what Anthony Vidler dubbed "the expanded field." The expanded field is not a problem in itself, but the promotion of it does seem to coincide with something of an identity crisis for the discipline and the profession. If it is used to avoid asking the important questions — what good architecture is, what architecture isn't, what expectations we can have of the services of an architect — then we may have a problem.

It's hardly surprising that students don't find it easy to make sense of the world or that they can't imagine what they might contribute as designers, when we are so unclear and confused in our description of what an architect is. The general therapeutic line that we peddle to students is that they can be anything they want to be (without explaining that to transform oneself demands hard work and

commitment not just calling yourself something different and demanding that everyone else recognises you as such).

If you want to change the world, you need to engage in (small "p") politics, which means engaging with, rather than disengaging
from, ideas one might not like. There is no short cut by indoctrinating the children of one generation to rebel against another. The outcome is not social change, but cynicism and a sense of hopelessness. If all the teachers that promote activism were to go out and get active in local politics in their own time — rather than doing it as part of their professional roles — we might have better community activism and more inspired students.

Running classes in a university on how to be a community activist, while masquerading as an educator, is not just patronising and paternalistic. It is ridiculous. Unfortunately, the ill-advised attempt to slip the social justice agenda into all aspects of education — primary, secondary and Higher Education — continues to tell students *what* to think rather than *how* to think. And, unsurprisingly, this doesn't make the students more engaged and radical, it makes them more passive and more ignorant.

Hannah Arendt, talking about compassion, makes the point that all humans are capable of expressing pain at the sight of human or animal suffering: it is a spontaneous reaction; you don't need to be taught to experience it. Whether that sentiment is transformed into an active engagement with the world and a sense that it is possible to change things relies not on compassion but on thought and a sense of personal responsibility for the world. Ironically, what our students lack now is personal responsibility for the world even if this is precisely what they think they have. Somewhere along the line our particular complacent brand of introspective criticality took that from them.

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1 — Murray, C. (2019) It's time for architects to choose ethics over aesthetics, Architects' Journal, 28 March

The Student Experience

Robert Poll

“Why would you do that? Why would you make it so tall?”

Committing these words to paper, stripping them of tone and timbre, may transform them into seemingly innocuous ones. But they weren’t. There, in that moment, the sunlight glistened on the spittle flying in my direction. He was angry. Actually *angry*.

Being a mature student had given me a thicker skin than many of the fresher faced victims of the crit who sat around me, whose eyes now flitted nervously between accuser and accused. The spittle bounced off me, metaphorically, if not literally. Perhaps it also helped that I agreed with him: I had made a mistake. Caught up in the rush to finish the model, which my accuser was now casting his eyes over with a barely concealed rage, I hadn’t yet taken a moment to stand back from it. Of *course* it was too tall. I could see that, I admitted it, and I was ready to move on.

If I was taken aback at all, it wasn’t because I was hurt or offended by this sudden outbreak of frankness, it was because I hadn’t witnessed anything like it before. Fellow students frequently lamented how nervous they were ahead of a crit and I was just as frequently left perplexed. Yes, the very first one in my first year had been an unknown quantity, but having emerged on the other side of it, both physically and mentally unscarred, it was evident they were nothing to be feared. The tutors were measured, positive and always keen to reiterate that it was a “twoway” process.

All of which might sound very constructive, but as I sat there observing anodyne crit after anodyne crit, I found precious little evidence of it. It soon became apparent that the best “two-way” processes are not necessarily calm and

measured. They don't have to be confrontational either, but the spark for constructive conversation generally arises from a little friction.

I remember being in the workshop after one crit, seeing another student in the process of recrafting his windows. "I don't think it's better," he confided, "but it's what she said to do." "Really?" was all I offered, as nonchalantly as I could, when what I really wanted to do was grab him and shake him and scream "So why didn't you tell her that?" In my experience, convictions were in short supply and I hated to see even one abandoned without a fight.

But this was typical of the student attitude to crits. They opened their presentation on send mode, spending a couple of minutes issuing as many coherent words as they could muster, then inwardly breathed a sigh of relief and switched to receive. Dialogue — that magic space where both modes coexist concurrently — was not to be.

This conversation was a microcosm of my fellow student's attitude to the larger design process: a series of iterations drawn out over far too many weeks, during which time the student's project slowly, inexorably metamorphosed into the tutor's project.

This emanates from a fundamental imbalance in the tutor– student relationship. Tutors will, of course, possess powerful design convictions of their own, which naturally rise to the top when left unchallenged. For the best outcome to emerge, all arguments must be made with equal passion. When faced with a weak design conviction, their strong one will prevail. It's the Darwinism of design. Universities need to ensure that it's the strongest design that succeeds, not just the strongest conviction.

One of my most tempestuous crits was when my tutors tried to foist a green roof on my design. The roof was flat, so I had naturally considered one, but deemed that it would compromise my design in several ways. But, come the crit, the tutors simply wouldn't let it go. After several minutes of acknowledging their argument and

trying to explain mine, I concluded that I had to speak more plainly. “Of course it’s right that I consider what you say,” I began. “However, I do not believe that I’m obliged to agree.”

Good design is not an objective truth. I shall always remember one crit of two halves which began with the tutors denouncing one student for a poor attempt at parametric shape-making, only for a more senior tutor to then enter the room and immediately start singing the praises of a fine example of parametric shape-making. It wasn’t long before the other tutors fell in line. Humans cannot resist a hierarchy, and where the student defers to the tutor, so the tutor must defer to their boss.

In most cases the hierarchy may prove right, but we should never just assume the hierarchy is a divinely ordained one. If collaboration is a good design tool, deference is a poor one.

Deference is also the enemy of passion. It prevents students from being passionate because they are afraid to be, and it means tutors are not passionate because they don’t have to be. With both parties terrified of a confrontation, an unwritten agreement emerges whereby the critic will be kind and the student deferential. But no interaction can be productive where both parties are afraid of disagreeing.

For the student, this fear is an old one. They remain trapped in a mindset they learnt during their earliest years at school, where teachers are authority figures and to disagree with them is to challenge that authority. That this mindset — so hostile to the encouragement of free thought and debate—should have survived secondary school is one thing, but it should certainly find no sanctuary in our temples of Higher Education. Society in general, and architecture in particular, need thinkers, not followers.

All too often our school system fails to differentiate behaviour from thought when it comes to instilling compliance. And while young adults are quick to cast off the shackles of behaviour upon arrival at university, they are less happy to cast off

those of thought. The intellectual habits we are conditioned in seem more deeply ingrained than our social ones.

For tutors, the fear is a more modern phenomenon. In the 21st century, the corridors of our universities are paved with eggshells. Many people live in fear of giving offence and those in positions of authority know they are just one insensitive remark away from the dole office.

The crit is rather like the live TV version of feedback. Where written criticism affords teachers the opportunity to self-edit and avoid remarks that might be misconstrued, the crit is unfiltered. The opportunity for a badly chosen word or a moment of emotion to squeeze through the gates of self-restraint is high. If we are afraid of language and raw emotion, then the logical end point is to retreat from all such interaction in favour of edited, dispassionate written communication.

Historically, an architectural education was far rawer. Training was gained in the real world, not the cloistered one of the university. Aspiring designers learned their trade by serving a pupillage in a professional office, where they faced the daily pressures of working with and rubbing up against clients, colleagues and contractors. Institutionalising architectural education has brought benefits but it has also created a situation in which theory can be too separate from practice. A valuable real-world connection can be lost.

In their future professional lives, architectural students will have to face criticism. They will have to defend their ideas and designs. Their designs will face threats from all directions: other designers with creative differences; consultants pushing simpler solutions; clients seeking value engineering. The crit stands as the only authentic preparation for this. And architecture students are not children. Indeed, given the length of the course, they are often in their midto late-twenties. They should neither require nor desire mollycoddling.

The benefits of the crit to the student go beyond toughening them up, however. Crits — particularly those in the middle of the design process — provide crucial

opportunities to step back from a project. As week after week passes, discussing the same issues with the same tutors inevitably narrows the focus. The head drops lower over the page, blocking out peripheral distractions in the drive to the finish. But when the crit comes, the head jerks up as the familiar walls around are transformed, papered with a myriad of drawings and images. Suddenly the focus is pulled back. The variety of responses a class of students provides to the same brief is astounding and never fails to instruct.

An even greater opportunity comes from the presence of guest critics. The student generally enters the crit having had weeks of feedback from just one or two tutors. Now the student has the opportunity to place their work before different eyes from other teaching studios or even from outside the university altogether.

These opportunities, if properly grasped, can provide a much needed injection of momentum into a stagnating project, much more so than just having an interim submission deadline. Preparing for a presentation is a fundamentally different skill to preparing a submission. In future professional life, both skills will be needed and any architecture course that fails to provide experience in presenting a design given limited time and space will be seriously lacking.

Stand and deliver

A successful crit, like any successful human interaction, requires both sides to engage in just the right way. Assertive but not aggressive, confident but not arrogant, conviction-based but not closed-minded. The relationship between tutor and student must be seen as one of equals, an interaction between adults. Yes, tutors have more experience and knowledge, which the students are paying to leverage, but the student–tutor dynamic must be different to pupil–teacher one.

The crit is the one place this relationship of equals can manifest itself. Written feedback of a physical submission is inherently hierarchical, as reflected by the very word *submission*. Where the submission follows a linear process of student submitting and tutor judging, so the crit facilitates a circular one where tutor and student both offer their views and respond to each other's.

We must not let the habits and fears promulgated by an increasingly protective and emotion-led society stand in the way of constructive human interaction. This is true in all fields of education, but particularly true in a creative one such as architecture where progress and innovation should come from the unfettered mind, free to confront what it sees, unafraid of challenging and being challenged.

Ask people who their favourite architect is, and they will likely give you the name of a person, rather than a company. The great architects of the past were individuals. And yet today we see an architecture dominated by companies, rather than names.

All too often, today's education system seems to punish individuality, elevating deference above courage of conviction. School systems are constructed in a way that moulds individuals into homogeneous groups. From the moment we enter architecture school we are put into groups that happen to be called studios. But when your name is called for your crit, it is your name, and suddenly you are alone.

This is not to deny the importance of collaboration. It is possible for great design to spring, Athena-like, from the head of a single genius. But it's also true that, in most cases, it evolves through ongoing collaboration, forging an alloy of several minds. If you are to make an alloy, however, you need some heat.

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Freedom of expression

Alex Cameron

The link between criticism and the crit is strong. A crit is a developmental process engaged in before a design is materially realised. Critique (or criticism) is, on the other hand, a public or industry-wide discussion that reflects on a finished product.

Nevertheless, both are grounded in an exploratory set of considerations and judgements, based on a shared, design-centred language. Both the crit and critique are attempts to define, understand and clarify the designer's intent and to refine and confront the efficacy of a particular approach. Both are processes in which the depth to which the designer understands and applies the fundamental principles of the craft of design is assessed. They amplify what a particular design or approach might contribute to the craft, as well as to culture and society.

The link is not just theoretical either. The reviews and challenges, the constructive analysis and brickbats of professional design, always feed back into the academy and the crit. The intellectual rigour displayed in criticism is a good indication of the health of an industry made up of practitioners and academics. Criticism and crit are bedfellows and an examination of one illuminates the other.

Carbon capture

A fundamental shift in outlook and ambition has upended the traditional design-centred approach to criticism. The all-pervasive mantra of sustainability has captured the academy, the commentariat, and our professional design associations to the degree that it is now having an impact on how professional practice is being assessed. Architecture has been captured by the ideology of environmentalism, sustainability and climate, to provide a new moral compass to

the profession. There are multiple examples of this but we must consider how trends in the real world create a backwash into the academy.

In 2022, Norman Foster, with the aid of the United Nations, launched the San Marino Declaration.[1] The Declaration calls for a "large scale mobilisation of millions of architects, planners, surveyors and valuers, and real estate professionals" to sign up to "principles for sustainable and inclusive urban design and architecture in support of sustainable, safe, healthy, socially inclusive, climate-neutral and circular homes, urban infrastructure and cities." Foster declared that designers: "have a unique duty to drive forward transformational changes at the scale required."

One might be forgiven for imagining that he meant change would come via the huge-scale buildings designed by his company, whether it was his airports (in France, Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia) or his high-rise luxury developments, like the 47-storey tower in New York's Park Avenue. Or city masterplans in India, China and Vietnam to name but a few of his global projects.

To be clear, I am in support of such mega-developments — I happen to think that the sustainability lobby vastly overstates its case and giving large numbers of human beings some place to live together is a good thing — but I have some sympathy for those that don't. It must also stick in the craws of devout eco-warriors to hear Foster advocating for sustainability on an international stage. But what appears to be rank hypocrisy is best understood by reminding oneself that the ideology of sustainability is built on shifting sands. Build luxury developments for oligarchs, tech billionaires and fund managers, and you are part of the global problem. Insert buzzwords like "inclusivity", "sustainability" or "people-centred" in the press release and you will automatically be welcomed back into a comfortable section of the ethically virtuous fold, ready to pontificate once again from the moral high ground.

Greenwashing, as it is known, has been around for a long time, and whether you accept or reject the green defence, environmentalism is the only game in town.

Whether it's cynical or strategic, the all-pervasiveness of environmental discourse nudges the true believer into a "search for a more genuine sustainability."[2] Similarly, Irena Bauman, author of *How to be a Happy Architect*, slams architects who have built football stadiums in Qatar as unethical, and demands that the industry "call out" their hypocrisy.[3] As a result, yet another righteous buzzword will enter the designer's lexicon—one that demands that architects must not display "vanity and greed" (she says). This pseudo-religious framing of environmentalism as a fightback against a range of deadly sins is an attempt to set the parameters for what is permissible for the next generation of architects. We are living in a doctrinal and dogmatic age and the tablets shall be handed down to the next generation of architecture students.

When not demanding the public shaming of architects who don't prostrate themselves to the new religion, the new clerisy is calling for even more restrictions and bans on architects that refuse to comply.[4] Others, scathing of the idea of "sustainability courses", retreat into the metaphysical and suggest a mind shift in our relationship with nature, and that we recant our heinous crimes of "trashing the planet".[5]

The Holy Trinity of environmentalism, sustainability and climate ideology inhabits criticism today. The academy and professional associations have managed to dominate without much discussion and maintain sustainability et al as the defining guide to architectural practice. What is being lost is the idea of the independent architect who is free to make critical and considered decisions about what they build, without conceptual restriction, political hindrance or personal prejudice. Critics of the new orthodoxy might find themselves muted, denounced, or worse.

Take Oklahoma City's First Americans Museum by Johnson Fain Architects, which opened in 2021. This vast $175 million project (25 years in the making) was guided by the Indigenous principle of rematriation (returning the sacred to Mother Earth). You can see why it appeals to both contemporary decolonisation and environmentalist thinking. It sees modernity and human intervention — to force nature to yield to humanity's needs — as a pox on the planet.[6] This is not

architectural criticism; it is a politically and ideologically motivated attack on "unacceptable" architecture. It is not "of " design, but is an external imposition, one that contemporary design leaders and commentators have been only too happy to internalise and champion, such is their loss of faith in the great leaps made by modern society.

Another example: The Warka Village project in Southern Cameroon, by Italian architect Arturo Vittori, is being touted as "a model for sustainable development" in the developing world. The project's "low impact", "passive design" utilises locally-sourced materials including bamboo, palm leaves, etc. But this is Vittori's freedom of expression vision of how these people should live, noting that "it's not inventing something new; it's returning to living in a more adaptable way."[7] If what we are celebrating is low impact — a sleight of hand that tries to obscure the lack of any intention to develop living conditions fit for the 21st century — we can forget about real material development that could catapult the Warka Village (and much of Africa besides) out of grinding poverty and harsh subsistence living.

Discrimination and tolerance

Such a celebration — or patrician acceptance — of what is euphemistically called "low impact" living (i.e., poverty) is actually an overtly political stance rather than a deontological one. It is morally contemptuous of certain ways of living. In this way, criticism of a given design becomes a technocratic and philistine intervention in the terms of the debate rather than an assessment of the aesthetics, engineering, tectonics or functionality. Anyone with an opinion can join in modern-day criticism of a building without having to bother with the pesky duty to visit, research, study or analyse it. If, in the opinion of the politically motivated critic, a building avoids addressing contemporary concerns, e.g., if it doesn't use sustainably sourced materials, if the client is unacceptably corporate, if there are no solar panels or heat-pumps, if it is made of concrete, then it can be condemned as a bad building.

Unfortunately, it is not just the arena of individual criticism that should be of concern to practitioners. The regressive implications of this dominant outlook, for

professional practice, can be found in the institutionalising of sustainability as the central organising principle of the built environment.

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) has embedded programmes in its codes of practice straight from the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 playbook. So too the Design Council's Design for Planet. Both demonstrate that the primary driving force behind the sustainability mission is institutional political agendas. That architectural bodies and commentators have proven themselves such keen advocates for global institutions and governments, should be a real cause for concern.

Worse still, it is soon to be mandated that architects will be compelled to think, act and demonstrate their commitment to this ideology. The Architects Registration Board (ARB) has recently been given increased funding and licence by the UK government to intervene in education on this question. According to the ARB, Environmental Sustainability is to be taught at every level of Architecture undergraduate, postgraduate and professional diploma education. Furthermore, if a student is unable to demonstrate their commitment to these diktats, they may be refused access to the Register of Architects.[8]

Sustainability is indefinable in purpose, forever changing in character, never settling, but always present and ever demanding of architects and designers. The problem is that the sustainability agenda teaches us nothing about the products of those two professions because it is a political intervention that should be possible to contest. Of course, at the moment, it is seldom challenged, and we are rarely accorded the privilege of having an opposing — or different — view on the environmental agenda. Essentially, environmentalism is a form of compelled speech. Praise is directed at those who repeat the sustainability mantras. By default, open criticism is increasingly cowed.

Architects have always concerned themselves with the environments in which they build, but this is a far cry from the requirements and restrictions being imposed by a political mainstreaming of sustainability. Pressure to comply enforces the idea

that we must "redefine what 'good' architecture looks like and successfully make the case, for example, that ultra-low Whole Life Carbon buildings are simply better buildings."[9] In this formulation, an Indian slum is "better" than a 1970s semi. Indeed, as Alfredo Brillembourg, founder of Urban-Think Tank says, a slum development "offers incredible lessons for the rest of the world."[10] Good architecture is thus confused with a righteous politics which proselytises anti-consumerist architecture of low aspiration. If that's what you believe, fair enough, but this is being sold to the rest of us as the only message in town, which — in case this needs to be pointed out — it isn't.

What the moral gatekeepers decide to highlight will impact on both practice and education. What becomes the primary focus of our interventions will inform the next generation of designers. We have gone way beyond a design discourse centred on concepts like craft, form and place, and entered a period where ideology has captured the imagination of design elites in the academy and elsewhere. All the while, this ideological commitment to environmental catastrophism is having demonstrably negative consequences for the discipline and for society more broadly. It is elevating the needs of the new elite at the expense of wider society.

The needs of the public are rarely courted in design commentary today. Whatever happened to architectural associations demanding the building of mass housing programmes and nationwide infrastructure projects? The low horizons of design leaders see the future of public building more as a matter of retrofitting and insulation. There is also a palpable attitude that is suspicious of building anything of substance at all. Mies van der Rohe's aphorism "Less is More" has been spectacularly subverted to read, "Less is Good: More is Irresponsible."

As long as criticism is framed by an apocalyptic discourse, it will be difficult for an expansive, humanist vision of the future to break through. Against the moral certainty of the environmental zealot, criticism is also in danger of being subverted and becoming just another tool of ideologues. If critique — and by extension, the crit — is to remain a vital contribution to architecture's future, we will need to get

better at resisting external political and ideological forces and get back to an independent design approach to architecture.

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Chinese lessons

Xi Junjie

“Study Hard, Improve Every Day” [好好学习 天天向上] is one of the many quotable sayings made by Chairman Mao in the 1950s. The literal translation is “good, good study; day, day up.” There is an obvious irony to this phrase, with its nonsensical grammar, being used to urge everyone to learn English correctly. Regardless of its ineptness, this phrase became a cultural phenomenon in China and is still used widely on educational posters in schools, universities and workplaces.

When I was in primary school in China, the slogan “good, good study” would often be posted on the walls of classrooms to remind us of our duty and mission. To study alone is not enough; we need to have self-reflection too. When I was in primary school in China, our maths teacher, Teacher Wang, asked each of us in the class to prepare a small notebook to record our daily self-reflections. Mr Wang said that he was inspired by the teachings of Confucius, in which one of Confucius’ students, Zenzi, recommended “introspection three times daily.”

Aside from this demand for rigour, there were other, more classic forms of discipline. In China in the early 1990s, slapping children’s hands with a ruler was still allowed — and welcomed — in schools. Like the UK maxim from the 1970s, “spare the rod, spoil the child”, a famous Chinese quotation reminds us that “a dutiful son emerges from the stick” and, as such, some parents would have been worried if the teacher didn’t smack their children, concerned that it meant that their child was beyond hope. Some parents would even go to the teacher and say, “please, teacher, you have my permission to beat my child!”

When I went to secondary school, a different Mr Wang had his own method of self-reflection and discipline. He asked us to write and submit weekly essays to report on the “bad behaviour” of fellow students. In this way, he could monitor our academic progress, he said. Unsurprisingly, students turned on each other,

creating a rather intense atmosphere, especially among those students who were deemed weak.

At the end of every semester, our marks would be printed and stuck on the walls in the classroom. The whole year group of over 450 students would rush to see their own results and inspect everyone else's. Private embarrassment was impossible. Exam rooms were divided based on those marks. As expected, I was always in exam room 30 and sat with the other losers. The teachers were not beating my hands anymore and they did not ask me any questions in class (only the good students were asked questions) because what is the point in hearing wrong answers?

Entering university was a miracle, as my father would say. The first essay that I wrote there was called "self-criticism." I continued the general theme of how I could continue to improve myself and that I must never be corrupted by bad influences. Therefore, I went to England to pursue a Masters, and also to test out whether I could be corrupted by the rotten ideology of capitalism.

In 2008, I started my Masters study at the University of Leeds, where teachers would never make any critical comments. One teacher always referred to our drawings as "interesting" or she would say, "that is interesting," which I subsequently learned meant "that is not very interesting." It was a good lesson in colloquial English, as well as the British facility for irony and reserve even if, initially, it was very confusing for an overseas Chinese student to have a tutor who would not say what she thought. That said of course, I have many happy memories of my time there.

I admit that my studies in the UK provided a more trouble-free time for me than I might have had in China. I did not feel like a complete loser, and I managed to learn how to look for information by myself. I learnt how to seek help from others and also how to be independent. However, there was still a sense of loss. I couldn't help but remember what Ms Shen from primary school used to say: "Being strict and harsh is love." I often wondered whether perhaps no one really cared about my

intellectual progress but were more concerned about creating a particular environment in which to learn.

By 2014, I was back in China teaching in a university architecture department. During one tutorial, a student presented some extraordinary drawings, which were full of creative ideas. However, because the drawings were abstract, I didn't quite understand how the plans worked and I simply said, "I don't understand your plan." Later, when I went back to the studio at the end of the day, I saw that this student had destroyed all their drawings and smashed the models. I have no idea whether it was the social pressure to do well, personal shame or the desire to do better that caused this reaction from the student, because surely, they had taken my moderate comments in completely the wrong way.

Since coming back to the UK a few years ago, I started to pay attention to the differences between students from China and students from the UK and whether we could address any difficulties positively. Many tutors have expressed the feeling that students from China are hard-working and often show up in the tutorials well prepared. Is this a stereotype, a caricature or an accurate generalisation? Is it insulting or flattering? Should UK tutors mention it, or would that be culturally insensitive or inappropriate? Are we becoming paranoid about causing offence, albeit innocently?

The students in some Chinese universities start to prepare their portfolios for applications for work experience or to do a Masters from the end of the first semester in their second year, while our UK students often will not be thinking about it till towards the end of third year. Indeed, some Chinese universities make allowances so that the undergraduates' final year is not as educationally challenging as the previous years to allow students to take time in sending out portfolios and job applications.

Many students from China spend a huge amount of cash on preparing their design portfolio. This could be through signing up to private tutorials, by taking lessons in several different forms of computer-aided design or even paying agencies directly

to edit and produce the portfolio for them. Many students who receive average marks will then spend time and money reinventing their schemes for their portfolio. Teachers at Western universities worry that some of their students from China don't take the same care and effort with their academic presentations as they do with their portfolios, but often the portfolio content has very little to do with what is shown in the classroom crit.

Private agencies — including those based in the UK — offer to write personal statements and prepare applications for paying student customers. Rumours abound that a student might pay as much as £10,000 to get an A-grade package. This is perhaps unimaginable in the UK but parents from China are incredibly stressed about which university their children will enter for their Masters degree. Social media groups are set up among parents to discuss who knows whom: the best agency, the best school, the best private tutor — whatever it takes.

Covid at least brought change in that regard. The restrictions imposed by lockdowns across China brought online reviews to the fore and forced architecture departments to adapt, particularly around the culture of the architecture crit. Online provision became, and remains, increasingly popular in top architecture schools in China as it allows departments to invite famous architects from across the globe to crits and to broadcast these online. For example, both Tsinghua and Tongji Universities' Schools of Architecture have organised masterclasses where the students receive comments from star architects with the process aired across the internet.

This process is not always a good thing given that people are nervous about how their words will be construed or how they could end up as a screenshot on social media, particularly if prying eyes are watching for evidence of "misspeaking" (in a Chinese context). The benefits of online teaching brought insights into Western ways of working, while also creating a certain distance between students and their own institutions. One student recently wrote a note alongside an online crit: "This is a discussion, not Pi Dou." Pi Dou means to criticise and denounce someone

publicly for their errors, a popular term during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s.

Saving face

Back in the UK, our university's crit process requires one student to make a note of the feedback for the presenting student. We find that students from China often don't write much at all while our UK students write a long feedback sheet for their fellow students. I have often wondered whether the Chinese reticence is due to students' poor grasp of written English as a second language or whether the single-child policy of China (which only ended in 2016) has resulted in less generosity to others. After all, the social structure in China is hugely competitive and sharing information is often perceived as jeopardising one's own chances. However, it could also be a hangover from those self-criticism essays and the telling-tales-on-others reports from their youth.

While many Westerners assume that education in China is harsher than in the West, in fact, the architectural crit in the UK is not necessarily softer or easier than in China. But there are key cultural differences. The importance of "mian zi" [面子] is often forgotten when interpreting Chinese responses to events. "Mian zi" means "(saving) face" and is associated with that person's dignity and honour. In a Chinese crit, a reviewer will often give "mian zi" to the student, leaving not only the student with their dignity intact but also the tutors are left with the respect of the student. The teaching evaluation in all universities in China also provides a platform for students to write comments and score their teachers, which encourages teachers to form positive relationships with their students.

In the UK, the phrase "relationships with students" often carries sordid connotations and even at the most basic level, tutors are regularly expected to mark anonymously (in other words, to not know their students) to avoid the automatic assumption of bias. In China, by contrast, there is a socially prescribed respect shown to many teachers that is not evident in the modern Western university model. It is not exactly deference, but it reflects a social order in which students feel that they have a duty to do well.

Since 2020, a new word, “neijuan” [内卷] has spread across the internet. The word translates as “involuted” and is used to describe a feeling of burnout in an environment of intense competition. It indicates the feeling of being in the rat race, where personal striving doesn’t lead to individual benefits or social improvement. Students and young generations are particularly keen to use this word to emphasise how competitive the study/work environment is in China. As a result, another word, “tangping” [躺平] has emerged to describe a person who does not care about achieving success and would rather withdraw from competing with the others into a life with no desire. China, influenced by trends in the West and traditions in the East, is at a crossroads. Will it maintain its rigour, or will the next generation opt for a different model?

I still often have arguments today with my father about the education that I received in schools in China. He has a straightforward assessment: “You need to be thankful and grateful to your teachers. Without their criticism, you would not have achieved what you have today.” This, therefore, has been my confession.

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Judgement

Vicky Richardson

Is it ever desirable to have rules that need no explanation? Is it ever desirable to have action without critical judgement? Demolition is the ultimate act of judgement on the success or failure of architecture, and it has become the latest example where a moral imperative — a declaration that is beyond debate — has replaced a discussion about quality. "Demolition is an act of violence", say French architects Lacaton and Vassal[1], while designer Sophie Thomas, former head of design at the RSA, says that "demolition of any sort should be banned"[2]. Conservationists are increasingly making calls to protect buildings based on factors other than their quality. Will Arnold, head of climate at the Institute of Structural Engineers, has put the case for a Grade III listing where all buildings would be automatically protected on environmental grounds.[3]

Architecture critic Charles Jencks wrote that "modern architecture died in St Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972, at 3.32pm (or thereabouts)" with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing estate.[4] In the UK, the death of Modernism is thought to have come a few years earlier with a gas explosion at Ronan Point in east London in 1968. The partial collapse of the tower two months after it was finished shook the public's confidence in modern methods of construction. The building, however, was patched up and continued to be inhabited until 1986 when it was finally demolished.

Both acts of demolition were symbolic of society's judgement on the ideology, popularity and practical success of Modernist architecture. Today, however, the advocates of adaptive reuse, such as the *Architect's Journal*, claim that demolition is unacceptable regardless of the quality or cultural significance of the work. As part of their Retrofirst campaign, their attack on Marks & Spencer's decision to replace a mediocre, unlisted 1929 building on London's Oxford Street has become a *cause celebre* for anti-demolition activists. Arguments about the future of the building

have, however, rested mostly on a calculation about carbon emissions rather than on matters of architectural quality and heritage.[5]

The decision about whether a building is worth keeping or demolishing is at the extreme end of a series of judgements that are intrinsic to architectural practice. One could argue that the whole task of designing buildings is a matter of judgement. From the strategic feasibility concerns to the details, design decisions are made by weighing up competing priorities such as client demands, planning guidance, economics and aesthetics.

Considering that it is difficult, and indeed undesirable, to design a building without critical dialogue, it is worrying that this process is being squeezed out of architectural education in favour of a more codified approach.

Architecture training, which used to be seen as an opportunity for experimentation and challenging norms, is becoming a process of inculcating social and environmental responsibility. Mandatory competencies from the RIBA about climate literacy now compel students to adopt particular design approaches, including biomimicry and designing with nature. In this situation the task of the tutor is to assess work against a checklist rather than to encourage criticism and debate.[6] In most schools of architecture the "crit", or review, which was once the mainstay of studio-based learning, is condemned as an opportunity for the ritualistic humiliation of students, or a demonstration of architectural machismo on the part of the tutor.

This shift reduces the intense design scrutiny that is thought to contribute to the high percentage of architecture students suffering mental health problems[7]. Few architects or academics defend the crit these days, even though there were good reasons why it was such a key part of architectural education. For a start, the crit is a good reflection of what happens in practice when an architect presents work to a client or interview panel — when they are invited not just to describe their proposal, but to defend it and engage in a conversation and exchange of opinions. The crit is also a forum where students play an active part in the process of

assessing their work, to sharpen their communication skills within a social setting where there are a range of voices. Sadly, this dynamic process is increasingly being replaced by formulaic assessments where the marking of student work is benchmarked against predetermined generic criteria.

Feedback loops

Alongside the rise of the ethical imperative and a view of students as potential victims, the marketisation of Higher Education has shifted the relationship between tutors and students. The latter are now consumers who have the right to question their grades and ask for evidence of decision-making. A tutor at one university recently told me, "We mark the student's work, but the university is predominantly concerned about avoiding student complaints. Instead of pass marks at 50, they are regularly lowered to 47 as a contingency. Thus 48 becomes the de facto pass mark".

It is also established practice in universities that regular feedback surveys are sent to students asking them to report on the performance of their lecturers. It is no surprise that teaching staff are reluctant to express an honest opinion about student work, and risk being embroiled in a complaints process. In this situation, the increasing codification of design judgement in teaching must come as a relief for academics.

The Bartlett School of Architecture (BSA) enquiry, which began in October 2021 and led to the publication of the Howlett Brown report in June 2022, has made the process of criticism and judgement in schools of architecture even more fraught with difficulty. The report was designed not just to position the BSA as a progressive institution but to serve as a warning to staff in all schools of architecture where there has been a supposedly toxic culture.

The report is a smorgasbord of complaints and anonymous allegations, covering everything from serious incidents of racism and sexism and flaws in the system of studio learning, to student complaints about being marked down, mental health issues and more. Allegations are anonymised and the report itself is based on

anonymous and unsubstantiated accusations. One of its main functions appears to be to encourage students and former students to come forward to name and shame staff. Some staff were suspended on the strength of these anonymous complaints and weren't even informed of their misdeeds. The result was a climate of fear where all BSA staff were under suspicion and were forbidden from talking to each other or students about the situation.

By the summer of 2022, and as a consequence of the report, many BSA tutors were being publicly shamed on anonymous Instagram accounts. Around 15 staff were suspended, disappearing from the school mysteriously, leaving their students adrift at a crucial moment in the academic year. While it was heartening to see some students come to the defence of their tutors in the comments section of the Instagram accounts, the situation at the Bartlett was intolerable.

To criticise this process is not to condone racism or sexism. Indeed, one could highlight the university's exploitation of international (particularly East Asian) students, who pay extortionate fees while having to adapt to a teaching structure that does not consider their academic, linguistic and cultural background. There is no excuse for discrimination or exploitation in universities, but due process, including the principle of innocence until proven guilty, is important to protect everyone.

Furthermore, whistle-blowers conflate racism at one end of the spectrum with unfair insults for poor work at the other, as if there is a continuum of toxicity at the school and that both attitudes are equally awful. Former student, Eleni Kyriacou, whose campaign of allegations triggered the BSA enquiry, has reportedly claimed the existence of what she calls a "culture of abuse", portraying lecturers as sectarians who mark down students according to various identity issues. "Moving forward, I'm going to now tell UCL that they must be transparent with their grading separated by gender, by race, disability and so on," she said.[8]

Supporters of this position, including many behind the Instagram accounts @TimesUp and @BartlettUnited, were prepared to sacrifice due process, and the

rights of the majority of decent lecturers in the interests of — as they saw it — adjusting the power relations between students and teaching staff. In this atmosphere, there is no space for a defence of tough crits, as I discovered after signing an open letter in defence of staff the Bartlett. Even though the letter made a clear separation between allegations of abuse and the debate about crits, signatories of the letter, including me, were accused of gaslighting the victims. Passive non-judgementalism, on the other hand, is supposedly equivalent to equality, diversity and inclusion.

One-way dialogue

This closing down of opinions affects the creative industries more widely than just architecture. Choreographer Rosie Kay, who found her position untenable and resigned from her own dance company, recalled that her cancellation took place against the backdrop of a cultural shift in which experience and knowledge counts for less, and criticism is no longer welcome as part of the training process. She said:

> *"In the dance conservatoires students are now customers or clients, and you have an anonymous grievance culture. When I was at dance school, it was too far the other way. It was tough and I wouldn't want to go back to that way of teaching. But now there is a rejection of any kind of level of expertise."* [9]

The positive qualities of the word "judgement", which used to be defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "the ability to make considered decisions", have largely been lost, perhaps as a result of the term "judgmentalism", which was popularised in the 1970s as a reference to narrow-minded prejudice. The adoption of the principle of non-judgementalism is nowadays equated with an open-minded, liberal attitude. However, we have to draw a distinction between off-the-peg or snap judgements arrived at through judgement prejudice, and judgement that is the result of a struggle to understand meaning, quality and values.

As judgement has fallen from grace, so we have seen the rise of terms such as "problematic", which is now routinely used in academia as a catch-all for anything that sits outside an agreed set of values. It implies something that is dubious politically and does not require a reasoned explanation of what that might be. Instead, students and academics alike are meant to understand the implicit values without the need to construct an argument or enter into dialogue. This is the very opposite of the openness and tolerance that non-judgementalism is supposed to be about and is creating a culture of posturing.

Judgement is a public duty that establishes connections and allows individuals to share their ideas about the world with others and thereby build communities. The reluctance to judge is an expression of a disinclination towards public association. It is a retreat from civil society, while imposing a view on that very civil society.

The process underway at the Bartlett and more widely within the practice of architecture, where judgement is replaced by codes of conduct and technical guidance, is about closing down discussion. Ultimately this process will undermine the possibility of learning from one another. It will lead to a more top-down form of education where students passively receive education and feedback, rather than being encouraged to challenge and enter into dialogue.

Under these circumstances it's hard to imagine space for inspirational teaching. The architect John Hejduk was one of the most admired architectural educators of the 20th century. In 1975, while becoming Dean of the Cooper Union School of Architecture, which he would lead for the next 25 years, he said: "I believe that the university is one of the last places that protects and preserves freedom, therefore teaching is also a socio/political act".[10]

Like Hejduk, we need to rethink the relationship between education, freedom and judgement, which is fundamental to allowing architecture to play a transformative role in society.

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Afterword

Rigorous debate, the discourse culture of our discipline, has been hollowed out in recent years. In schools of architecture, criticising student work is increasingly avoided. It is seen as disrespectful and regarded as an outmoded toxic culture. One underlying factor is identity politics. If ideas are understood to be tied up with identity, then criticism is perceived as an attack on those holding the ideas, and critics are deemed to be merely discourteous or wilfully offensive. The result is dysfunctional: the de-platforming of critics and an all-forgiving tolerance of all those communicating within the rules of the "safe space". This logic violates a key principle of discursive rationality, namely that ideas are to be appraised irrespective of their bearers.

The inhibition of frank critique is thus not only a matter of over-politeness or over-protection (as opposed to respect) but also a matter of historically motivated (but ultimately counter-productive) postmodern philosophical assumptions. At the heart of these assumptions lies a defeatism that considers the human condition — in terms of circumstances, worldviews, values and aspirations — as inherently fragmented without any hope of discursive convergence. This theory stands against the universality inherent in the aspiration for higher standards of living and individual liberty (as proven by global migration to countries offering better conditions).

Modernisation-for-all has become a much more fragile, complex and uncertain endeavour than initially expected by mid-20th century modernisation theories, including Marxism. Postmodernism's "incredulity towards grand narratives", as Jean-François Lyotard put it, inserted some necessary loops of reflection into social theory, in particular the reflection on historically and culturally specific discursive formations. These have been absorbed into more complex, subtle and circumspect social theories, and theories of societal progress, while the trajectory of postmodernism's own discourse mutated into the defeatist/self-defeating intellectual culture rejected in this collection of essays.

The postmodernists failed to discriminate between these diverse discursive formations, however. They also failed to recognise the superiority, or superior prosperity potential) of the unique lineage of discursive formations that postmodernism itself was a part of, namely Modernity, with its unprecedented elaboration of technology and science, including critical social science. They failed to recognise the unique self-transcending thrust of this lineage of discursive formation that actively refuses to remain tied to any historical origin, parochial social group or particular set of societies. While philosophy — particularly the work of Habermas and Luhmann — has moved dialectically from the modernist thesis via the postmodernist antithesis to a new synthesis that rehabilitates the concept of progress to a new level of complexity. Postmodernism — and under its influence much of mainstream academic culture — became the antithesis to modernisation theory.

In architectural debates, I often shift to the meta-level of critiquing architecture's discursive culture as a necessary preface to articulating my positions on substantive issues. This is necessary because my very quest to ascertain the most promising direction that architecture can take, to contribute to wider prosperity and social progress, appears to be discredited and considered anachronistic. The following are my meta-theses addressing the discipline's discourse culture:

1. Imperative of convergence

The discipline must strive to define a shared paradigm, as the best way forward. A shared paradigm is a precondition of cooperative, cumulative progress towards a global best practice. A coherent paradigm or goal is required so that simultaneous or sequential designs do not subvert each other and undermine the functional integrity of the built environment.

2. Rejection of pluralism

We must accept paradigm pluralism only as a temporary historical condition during periods of paradigm shift (e.g., 1900–1920; 1970–1990). Divergences are dialectically productive only if the aim is to resolve and overcome them. We must reject the fatalistic acceptance of a

supposedly unresolvable paradigm pluralism in architecture, just as we must reject the more general multi-culturalist presumption that all cultures are equally life-enhancing.

3. Benign intolerance

Ruthless criticism is a productive mechanism of convergence. The principle of indiscriminate tolerance makes sense only in a phase of post-crisis brainstorming. If made permanent, this principle denies the comparative evaluation of positions/paradigms and ultimately blocks progress.

The degeneration of the process and purpose of critical discourse is also undermining the important institution that is the public crit in architecture schools. Here too, the lack of any shared substantive paradigm that could model criteria of progress, undermines the legitimacy of criticism and judgement. What regulates the crit instead is the principle of indiscriminate, pluralist tolerance.

Crits no longer aim to appraise, debate and compare the relative validity and worth of projects/proposals, but degenerate to mere displays of unassailable subjective expressions, soliciting nothing but indiscriminate flattery. Elements are neither weeded out as inferior nor marked out as superior. But how can progress be made without rejecting failures, or selecting successful contributions as exemplars to build upon?

This systemic failure to promote progress across our universities not only stunts the discipline's development, but applies equally to individual students' learning curves. Worse, nothing stops the retrogression of students (and of whole academic design studios or whole schools) into ever more pointless pursuits. Where no pushback is ever expected and no defence is ever required, the indefensible mushrooms. Rigorous critique must be reinstated.

The most ruthless criticism of a project, proposition or even cultural tradition/identity, should never be taken as an ad hominem attack. No set of ideas

(nor any acquired or inherited cultural pattern or identity) represents an immutable characteristic that inherently defines or limits any person.

To rigorously criticise inferior ideas emancipates rather than disempowers.

To politely respect ideas one disagrees with, or that one recognises to be dysfunctional, is the very opposite of genuine respect.

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