Architectural
Theory
Review

Critical or Post-Critical?

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In the last decade, the parameters of what can loosely be called 'critical practice' have expanded far beyond the heady era of the 80s and 90s when such practices were confined largely to the history-theory wing of the discipline.[1] In those days, having a critical practice meant that one formulated questions about architecture's theoricity (often with Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida in the background), or that one related architecture to issues of historicism, gender, culture and fashion. Though the history-theory discipline has since expanded to include questions of psychoanalysis, historiography, and post-coloniality, the 'location' of the intellectual work associated with these various topics has become, admittedly, somewhat remote from what is conventionally known as architectural practice.

The evolution of history-theory discourses toward ever greater disciplinary refinement is, however, only half the equation. One must also acknowledge that changes of location have taken place in domain of 'practice.' I put it into quotation marks, because to think of practice outside of academe is fallacy. In fact, practice has intensified its fight for the control of academe.

The changes about which I am talking are so marked that I would argue that we should no longer be talking of Critical Practices, but rather of Post-critical Practices. Such practices try to emphasize an organic relationship between the head and the hand; they claim to heal, if not ignore altogether, the logic-of-disjuncture that was so important to traditional avant-gardist aesthetics; and finally, they want to emphasize the resiliency of the profession in the face of decades of skepticism. A taste of which was to be had at last year's so-called Pragmatism Conference at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, funded to no small degree by S.O.M.

Many of the fronts of Post-criticality are already well established. They would be New Urbanism, Green architecture, and even advanced computation. They are all part of our brave new age in which criticality is shaped not by concepts like resistance and novelty but by the need to solve pressing and large-scale communal, ethical, corporate, computational, and global problems. Post-critical aesthetics thus reduces the importance of traditional avant-gardist aesthetic methodologies. Collage in the 1920s, semiotics in the 1960s and film in the 1990s , for example, are, in the Post-Critical world, either distant memories or simply 'applied' as token reminders of an earlier aesthetic. Furthermore, there is less emphasis on the individual and more on 'the team,' but only in so far as the Post-critical architect is now like a film director who makes most of the 'critical' moves, but leaves production to well-trained members of the staff.

I would argue that the practice of Rem Koolhaas is a prime example of the Post-critical, especially if one takes into account the marketing of the name, image, and 'idea' of 'Koolhaas' by his own firm AMO. We are not dealing with avant-gardism as with the positioning of avant-gardist techniques. Frank Gehry's use of CATIA is also Post-critical for it is part of the emerging world of mega-computational research programs, the same world that will give us face-recognition technology, traffic-flow resolution technologies, advanced missile defense systems, and the like. The practices of William McDonough are similarly Post-critical in that they presume, even for his defenders, that one can have the cake and eat it too. "When do we all become indigenous people?" he asks!

All of these practices, though seemingly different, operate in a realm known by huge scales, whether that realm be physical, virtual or ethical. None of them touch on architectural historical-theoretical issues in the traditional sense because they are all grounded in essentially goal-oriented (and certainly un-ironical) attachments to science, culture, and empiricism. Furthermore, all of these practices, when taken together, sit comfortably within a political domain that is essentially capitalist and centrist. The Post-critical is, in that sense, part of the massive reorientation of practice and academe in the Post-Cold War era, with older forms of 'critical practice' driven to the margins. The quasi-spiritualizing agenda of the phenomenologists, on the one hand, and the usually more liberal-leaning agendas of the deconstructivists and pop-culturalists, on the other hand, survive, have lost their once dominant positions.

There are several specific reasons for the shift from the Critical to the Post-critical.

Firstly, there is increasing pressure to produce the high-end scholars who, when they start teaching, will live up to the increasingly more rigorous tenure standards. The top places now require two books. Over the last year the cost of 'producing' these Ph.D.s is now in the range of about 175,000 dollars.[2] This means that the expansion of Ph.D. programs in the future is limited.

Secondly, if the last thirty years saw the creation of history-theory Ph.D. programs in schools of architecture like MIT, Princeton, Columbia, and Cornell, the last decade has already seen the rise of Ph.D. programs in building technology and computation. These programs symbolize, and actualize, the rise of Sustainability and advanced computation in academe. History-theory programs will thus compete for the limited supply of students (and funding) with these new academic programs.

Thirdly, as theoretical issues have become more complex there has been less and less time to teach them at the M.Arch. level where they would be normally supported. All in all, M.Arch. education is becoming increasingly disorganized given the pressure to introduce non-aesthetic issues, like ethics and computation modeling, into the studio.

Fourthly, architectural academe has yet to adequately address the consequence of its ambiguity to intellection. 'Critical practice' for some is still nothing more than a cover for 'anti-theory.' I have heard advocates of Feng-shui proclaim themselves as having a 'critical practice.'

Fifthly, the possibilities that a Critical Practice is something that relates to one's private philosophy (as perhaps with Robert Venturi and Peter Eisenman) is becoming increasingly difficult in the world of that requires the corporatization of knowledge. Compare the short idea-articles of the 1970s with the corporate-textual productions of Koolhaas. Furthermore, the small 'idea-oriented' architectural office is going the way of the American family farmer. Surveys have shown a sad—and still much unrecognized—decline in mid-level firms, many of them no longer able to keep up with the expense of advanced computational design that is now required for larger projects. As a result almost any small, private practice is defacto a 'critical practice.'

What I am trying to say is that a discussion about Critical Practice is also a discussion about changes in the academic, disciplinary, and financial structure of architecture and the profession.

If the future lies with the Post-critical, there is enough healthy nostalgia for the Critical that it might survive. This is not to argue for one against the other. Instead, I believe that architectural discourse would be best served if the two were put in some relationship to each other. But that could only happen if they are mediated by a tertiary form of 'critical practice,' one that is akin to investigatory journalism. It would aim to point out the hypocrisies, ambivalences, complexities and ambiguities of our various aspirations. Such a 'critical practice' could, for example, point to the reductionism and techno-centrism that seems now to be embedded in much of our contemporary architectural teaching. Admittedly, such a 'critical practice' can only be sustained in academe, and then *only* in those academic environments that are not already given over to the idealist, pragmatist and empiricist ideologies that are such a part of mega-critical issues of today.

I believe that to have a truly vigorous discussion in the field of architecture, we will need all three forms of critical practice. The future is on the side of the first, and tradition on the side of the second. But without the third, critical practice is either a self-fulfilling prophesy, or a chimera.

Footnotes

1   See also Mark Jarzombek, "The Disciplinary Dislocations of Architectural History," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (Winter 1999): 488-493; "Molecules, Money and Design: The Question of Sustainability's Role in Architectural Academe," *Thresholds 18* (Spring 1999): 32-38; and "A Prolegomena to Critical Historiography," *Journal of Architectural Education* 52/4 (1999): 197-206.

2   Most Ph.D. programs are now moving toward a five-year package of tuition and stipend. Fifteen years ago, funding was minimal. Ten years ago, the three year package was the norm. Furthermore, because of the need to finish, the old model where Ph.D. students would supplement their income by working in a firm during the summer to pick up extra dollars is now frowned upon.