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Public Crits in Architectural Design Education: Some critical reflections

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ABSTRACT

Critiques (crits), which are a key form of interaction between teachers and students in the studio, are often reduced to static instances of a one-way knowledge transfer. Based on an ethnographic study of studio teaching at five leading European architecture schools, and referring to a concept of designing developed by design theorist Horst Rittel, the paper at hand discusses the rather passive role of students during crits as a shortcoming that has to be remediated for unlocking the full potential of the design studio approach.

KEYWORDS

crits, design reviews, design studio, teaching, ethnography, assesment

From the students' perspective the crit is probably the most gruelling and potentially humiliating experience of their education.¹
Dana Cuff (1992).

I n t r o d u c t i o n

Almost everyone, who has ever witnessed a public crit at an architecture school (that is, even an outsider alien to the profession, who simply took the wrong door), will immediately get Dana Cuff's famous argument quoted above. And in fact, besides Cuff, a large variety of scholars have reported on the 'climate of fear, defensiveness, anxiety, and stress'² that students (too) often associate with critique feedback: Anthony describes students, not seldom, leaving crits 'distraught, humiliated';³ Smith points out that while the crit format 'has strength in providing feedback instantaneously' it simultaneously runs the risk of becoming 'overly negative – sarcastic even';⁴ Webster elucidates that crits are likely to be 'experienced by students as a frightening event';⁵ Tucker and Beynon cite an interviewee, who has witnessed students 'vomiting, fainting through fear';⁶ and Blair found 'that students, for the major part of their presentation, are literally frozen with fear'.⁷ The list could easily be extended.

On the other hand, design studios are often understood as sheltered spaces. During our fieldwork, teachers at various occasions referred to them as spaces where students are allowed to experiment – due to the fact of being protected from the outside world with its ready-made assessment criteria and its demand for exploitable, marketable results. This aspect of seclusion should not be understood as problematic – quite the opposite; it may be regarded as one of the most crucial qualities of academia.⁸ This seclusion, however, is prone to becoming a problem when professors tend towards adopting 'one of the cherished myths of modernity',⁹ that is, an understanding according to which 'architecture is the fickle realm of taste' implying that not only the process of designing, but also oftentimes the quality of design proposals becomes accessible only to those few, who are in the loop. While there is no questioning the fact that the act of designing depends to a large extent on tacit knowledge and intuition,¹⁰ it can nevertheless be argued that the teaching of design may be organised in a manner that promotes traceability, transparency and comprehensibility by introducing a coherent methodology of design.¹¹

The extensive research project Radical Pedagogies (led by Beatriz Colomina) also sheds light on this field of tension.¹² As the Atlas of Radical Pedagogies maps out, in the wake of the 1968 student protests, also the strict hierarchical structure of studio education had come under attack. Students demanded the radical democratisation and self-determination of architectural education – and, at least in some schools, succeeded in asserting different forms of self-organisation that temporarily replaced inherited structures. In particular, students argued that studio education should get out of the ivory tower, deal with real-world problems and seek interaction with the public. Instead

of withdrawing from public life, design studios strived for ways of opening up, engaging with public discourse, addressing and interfering with burning issues. We may suppose that these hard-earned changes also included the course of public crits. The Atlas of Radical Pedagogies, however, makes it clear that in retrospect most of these endeavours have to be considered as rather short-lived experiments. Only shortly after their successful implementation, most of their decisive elements have been reversed – with the effect that, for instance, at midterm crits at the ETH Zurich, still in the late 2000s, ‘assistants were not allowed to say anything other than “Do you want some coffee?”’, as one professor put it in a personal communication.

It is this aspect of passiveness, in particular that of students, which I would like to tackle in this paper. While students’ passiveness is obviously closely related to various aspects of anxiety, I would like to shed light on it from a different perspective. The line of argumentation that I propose considers the rather passive part that students are granted and play within public crits as a significant shortcoming that prevents the format of the crit from unleashing its full potential as a procedure of training and learning.

B a s i s , s c o p e a n d a i m

The paper at hand is based on empirical data gained by means of an ethnographic study investigating the teaching of architectural design. The focus of this study (which I conducted together with PhD candidate Kim Helmersen) had been on crits – on the basic assumption that they constitute instances where methodologies that otherwise often remain tacit become apparent and discernible, simply due to the fact that professors, assistants and students are forced to verbalise and make explicit their considerations, intuitions and understanding.

Within our study, Helmersen and I visited selected studios at five architecture schools in Europe: ETH Zurich, Technical University of Munich, University of Stuttgart, AA London, and KADK Copenhagen. The selection of these schools aimed at covering a broad range of orientations: from institutions following the poly-technical model (ETH Zurich, Technical University of Munich, University of Stuttgart) to art schools (KADK Copenhagen), and *in-betweens* (AA London). Furthermore, some of these institutions might be considered as role models for the respective type of orientation – hence, it can be assumed that they assert a certain influence on the academic landscape.

For each of these schools, we analysed the studio and course catalogue and identified the most promising examples with regard to both methodological and thematic rigour, inventiveness, and peculiarity. Due to pragmatic reasons, we finally chose three to four studio courses per school, which we followed over the course of one semester each. In this way, we made sure that also our sample of studios covered rather broad range with regard to the approaches they proposed, the tasks they assigned and the objectives they pursued.

In accordance with the explorative character of our ethnographic study, we aimed at compiling an expressive sample, being fully aware that our data sample is not to be considered representative in a statistical sense. Also, we consider our study as inductive, that is, we conducted it in a manner 'as to use an accumulation of descriptive detail to build toward general patterns or explanatory theories rather than structured to test hypotheses derived from existing theories or models'.¹³

Our fieldwork comprised interviews and informal conversations with teachers (professors and assistants) as well as students, the observation of a few desk crits (that is, informal, one-on-one assessments at students' desks), but primarily focused on public intermediate and final reviews. Within these crits, we played a variety of roles, from solely silent observers to active members of the jury panel directly involved in criticising students' projects.

While the passive role that is assigned to and taken up by students in public crits had not been part of our initial set of research questions, it has developed as a topic of interest during fieldwork, since it presented itself as a recurring pattern common to (almost) all cases studied. Due to this striking recurrence – again: despite all differences between the observed institutions and studios – I decided to use this paper to attempt a generalisation on the basis of our findings (instead of providing a series of particular, idiosyncratic and localised accounts) and to develop a theoretical reasoning for the necessity to reframe the course of public crits.

Observations

The large majority of the public crits that we observed constituted rather static instances of a one-way knowledge transfer structured by a strict operational sequence: After delivering a well-prepared presentation, students receive the professors' and guest critics' well phrased verdict. The presentation most of the time resembles a sales pitch: students often do everything possible to hush the flaws and problematic aspects of their designs as well as the difficulties they themselves see in mending them. The verdict in turn comprises thoughts that connect aspects of architecture history and theory that may or may not have been discussed in respective lectures, a set of references to consider, more or less vaguely indicated alternative solutions as well as a set of practical concerns (as regards, e.g., statics, fire protection or building law) – of course, not all of these categories of assessment and advice are necessarily deployed in every crit.

This intermixed character of the verdict, which relates to the 'syncretic nature of architectural education' combining 'technics and aesthetics, sciences and humanities',¹⁴ poses an enormous challenge for students to gather (and later on make use of) all the information thrown at them. And although we were perfectly aware that students had been nervous, exhausted, overworked, and frightened during public crits, one fact left us absolutely puzzled: during

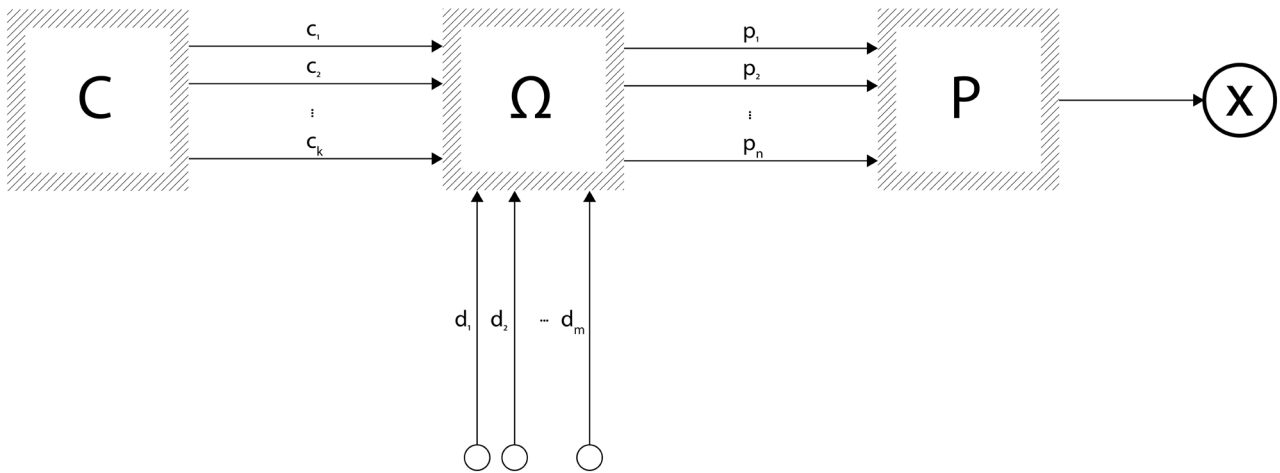
a whole day of crits, students hardly ever asked a question, never spoke up or made an effort to contribute to the discussion, let alone challenge an argument put forward by a teacher.

In what follows, I will discuss this lack of debate and the passive role assigned to and taken up by students during public crits as a significant shortcoming, which has to be remediated for unlocking the full potential of the design studio approach. In order to make this case, I will introduce a conceptual framework for understanding design processes as developed by design theorist Horst Rittel in the late 1960s, early 1970s.

Conceptualising the design process

Rittel, an early pioneer of the design methods movement, undoubtedly considered his description of the design process as a (scientific) model or even a guideline that architects and (urban) designers could directly apply and make use of in order to rationalise and improve their procedures.¹⁵ As can be stated from the vantage point of the present though, Rittel's proposal wielded only little, if any, influence on working modes and the self-perception of the profession. Moreover, it had never really been considered relevant for the curricula of architecture schools. Apart from singular cases, such as the planning of the Olympic Village in Munich,¹⁶ architects at large have never picked up on Rittel's ideas as modes of operation. In the same way, Rittel's construct of ideas conceived of as an abstract (scientific) model for design processes failed to provoke interest: it never succeeded in representing a generalisation of the design process – that is, its state of affairs and their conditions – that conformed to the realities as perceived by practitioners. If one, however, tries to understand Rittel's construct of ideas as a philosophical concept in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari¹⁷ – and not as the scientific functional model he himself envisioned, it suddenly speaks of the event of designing, without being 'mixed up with the state of affairs in which it is effectuated'.¹⁸

According to Rittel, design processes are characterised by an arrangement of three sub-processes (Fig.1): firstly, the understanding of the environment in which the design to be developed is supposed to intervene in – which Rittel calls 'context-model', represented as the box labelled C; secondly, the production of a spectrum of solution proposals – which Rittel terms 'object-model', represented by the box labelled Omega; and thirdly, the assessment of each solution proposal – which Rittel refers to as 'performance-model', represented by the box labelled P. Rittel stresses that each of these three models represents a distinct process, yet, at the same time, these three processes are mutually dependent. The understanding of the environment in which the intended design is supposed to intervene in informs the production of a spectrum of solution proposals as well as the assessment of each solution proposal – and vice versa. This perfectly resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's definition of concept:



Every concept has components that may, in turn, be grasped as concepts. (...) [W]hat is distinctive about the concept is that it renders components inseparable *within itself*. Components (...) are distinct, heterogenous, and yet not separable. (...) [S]omething passes from one to the other, something that is undecidable between them.¹⁹

Figure 1:
The design process as an arrangement of three sub-processes: Context-Model, Object-Model and Performance-Model (Rittel 1970; redrawn by Jan Silberberger).

As a first component, the context-model, following Rittel, represents the process of selecting those aspects of the environment that are considered relevant and immutable. It is important to note, that this selection is an act of interpretation – comparable to composing the story of the design problem at hand, as Rittel reminds us.²⁰ The object-model, as a second component, represents the process of generating a set of possible solutions. As Rittel's diagram shows, this process is informed by the context-variables and at the same time dependent on the chosen design-variables. According to Rittel, the creation of the variety of solution proposals is to be understood as a process of combining design variables. The design variables in turn are selected in relation to the problem at hand and assume a variety of possible values. Omega then represents the set of solution proposals, that is, the set of all value combinations of the different design variables. Finally, the performance-model, as a third component, represents the process of assessing every single proposal that has been produced within the object-model. This assessment bases on the context-variables – one may say it is predisposed by them, yet not predetermined.

Although these three components demand only 'implicit and subjective presuppositions: [every designer] knows what [context], [object], and [performance assessment] mean',²¹ the intricate zones or thresholds where the components become indiscernible need some explanation. While Rittel's flowchart might suggest that design processes follow a simple, linear sequence, he explicitly emphasises that designing is an iterative, multi-directional process and that feedback loops constitute an integral part. Rittel himself mentions the possibility that none of the filtered solutions will be considered promising. In such a case, to use Rittel's terminology, the variety

of solution proposals has to be opened up again, which means to review and adjust the design – and context – variables. The title of his paper already proclaims that, for Rittel, designing is characterised by an iterative interplay between opening up and closing down the variety of solution proposals. Stressing that designing is to be understood as a process of developing an image or idea in relation to the problem and its solution, it is the resonance between the distinct, heterogeneous sub-processes of developing interpretations of the context, design proposals as well as their assessment that, according to Rittel, shapes and reshapes the event of designing.

C r i t s a s c o l l e c t i v e e v e n t s

If we take Rittel's concept of designing seriously and accept the inseparability of problem definition, development of design proposals, and their assessment (which seems to resonate with the understanding of most architects), then it follows that one can also learn about designing by means of critiquing – meaningfully critiquing – design proposals developed by other authors. Surprisingly though, according to our observations, students' abilities to judge projects of others are not systematically trained. It is of course true that a variety of assessments of solution proposals are folded into every project, which means that a student's ability to judge solution proposals is supervised in crits – albeit only indirectly.

Professors and assistants at all architecture schools we studied constantly stressed the importance of the studio as a collective training area reminding their students to work in the shared studio space instead of at home. In practice, sharing a studio does not just mean that students are exposed to different methodologies and the development of different solution proposals, but also that they receive feedback from their fellow students, are asked for advice and challenged to judge their peers' work. In this way, as several of the professors we spoke to stated, 'students learn as much from each other as they learn from us'. This is to say that students train to judge solution proposals not just in relation to their own projects, but also in relation to those of their peers – yet still, they are not specifically mentored in exercising this integral component of designing.

'As a student, I learned quite a lot from watching professors and guest critics judging the projects of my fellow students', stated one professor that we interviewed, adding that this training in judgement did not comprise her own direct involvement but was limited to 'listening carefully'. This demonstration mode of teaching also plays a role in desk crits, where students, as several professors pointed out, 'also learn by watching the instructor sketching possible solution proposals', that is, 'by watching a knowledgeable architect literally demonstrating the act of designing'. Yet, despite the fact that it is impossible to quantify the impact of this latter mode of design teaching, it seems safe to say that architecture schools – no matter if they follow the polytechnical model or a beaux-arts tradition – throughout history, have

without question based the education of students essentially on the axiom that learning to design can most effectively be done by practising the act of designing.

While Rittel's paper can be read as a constant reminder that learning to develop design proposals can neither be separated from learning to interpret the basic conditions of the problem nor can it be separated from learning to judge the performance of solution proposals, it simultaneously allows for pulling apart these three inseparable procedures on a conceptual level. Executing such separation leads to the question whether public crits could not be understood as sites where students are not only supervised (in relation to the project they presented), but also explicitly train the judgement of design proposals? To put it differently: if designing is learned by performing the act of designing, could crits not be seen as an (almost) ideal-typical environment for students to exercise the judgement of the performance of solution proposals (to use Rittel's words)?

Obviously, such understanding would require creating effective ways of integrating students into the assessment of their peers' projects – which, in turn, would mean no less than profoundly intervening into the prevailing mode of crit practice. During fieldwork we encountered several such endeavours. We have observed studios that replaced the typical movable walls with a large round table thereby significantly altering the spatial setting of the crit; studios that assigned students as discussants (each student was asked to comment on the work of one of their peers as part of the jury); as well as studios that experimented with the format of the students' presentation: one studio asked students not to present their works personally but selected fellow students to perform that task; another professor explicitly asked students to prepare two or three questions with regard to critical aspects of their design proposals (instead of the typical sales pitch).

It is evident that crit practice has become an issue of concern at architecture schools in recent years. At this year's 'Parity Talks V: Actions and Accountability' conference at ETH Zurich, for instance, crit practice had been one of the key topics and, what is probably even more significant, over the last years a substantial body of literature emerged that proposes concrete and well-devised measures to improve crits.²² It is beyond the scope of this paper to review these measures.

Instead, the intention of the paper at hand, as will not have escaped the attentive reader, has been to conceptually frame a rather simple question: Taking into account that architecture students learn to design by practising the process of designing and being coached in relation to the (interim) results this process yields, could crits not constitute instances, where students, in a most effective manner, exercise the judgement of design proposals? Would a course of action that does not solely rely on professors and assistants performing critiques and demonstrating how to assess projects, but that

empowers students to put their judgement abilities on display – which, in turn, would allow for direct and effective supervision of these abilities – not be perfectly in line with the studio approach?

In conclusion, and in response to this question, I would like to put forward the hypothesis that any step towards the inclusion of students in the judgement of their peers' projects could constitute a significant step towards tapping the full potential of the studio model of education.

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