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Introduction

Amy Perkins, Jeremy Waterfield, and Adam Jasper

Amy Perkins is a founding member of Assemble and holds a guest professorship with James Binning at EPFL.

Jeremy Waterfield is a master's student at the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich.

Adam Jasper is an assistant professor of the history and theory of architecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

1 This project on the crit began at the end of 2020. Milena Buchwalder, Simona Mele, Lukas Fink, and Jeanne Casagrande, with Amy Perkins and Jeremy Waterfield, formed a working group to organize a workshop on crits for the fifth Parity Talks. Adam Jasper, Kim Helmerson, and Jan Silberberger joined for the workshop itself. The idea, slightly disrupted by COVID-19 in March 2021, was to invite the three second-year studios of the Department of Architecture at ETH to "workshop" a crit format and then trial it during the semester. Our hope was that afterward students would feel enabled to question and take control of how they learned and that professors and assistants would become more aware of and use with greater precision the tools with which they were teaching.

2 The Parity Talks is an annual event for the discussion of gender and diversity within the spatial disciplines at the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich. The talks and workshops are organized by a fluid group of volunteer students and staff, collectively known as the Parity Group.

This issue of *gta papers* began with our immediate professional milieu. ¹ The crit, which has long been an end-of-semester rite of passage in architectural education, has become a lightning rod. Despite its long history as a space of teaching, it has become a scene of confrontation between teachers and students. The judgments handed down in crits are no longer accepted without question, and the denigratory comments made during crits are no longer forgotten without consequences during the (equally ritualistic) drinking afterward. The crit seems to have shifted from a gymnastics display to a boxing match. When we started this investigation in the context of a workshop for the Parity Talks group at ETH Zurich, we thought that the crit, as the scene of the conflict, was the crux of the conflict. ² If the ritual was made less arcane, less asymmetrical, less confronting, it might produce a less hostile, less patriarchal architectural education. Maybe, we thought, we should get rid of the crit as a practice altogether. After nearly four years of talking to countless students, assistants, and professors both formally and informally, interviewing educational experts, experiencing many crits from every position, online and off, the phenomena we observed at the beginning still hold true, but we are radically more uncertain about what to do.

While the studio format of teaching is widely praised for its close collaborative work, its openness to experimentation, and the multiple modes of learning it embraces, the crit attracts a more ambivalent kind of attention. For students, the buildup to the crit is a period of great intensity, and the crit assumes a disproportionate significance. The crit throws the cold light of day on the world the students have constructed within the studio, and this is unavoidably a vulnerable moment. When it has been the subject of academic research, the crit has been characterized as an outdated or damaging tradition in need of reform or even abolition. In recent years, the general mood seems inclined towards condemning the crit. *Rethinking the Crit: New Pedagogies*

in Design Education (2023) focuses on safeguarding students from abuses of power, even sharing examples of architectural schools that have stopped doing crits entirely.³ This book includes an entry by, and follows in the footsteps of, authors such as Kathryn Anthony, whose 1987 essay "Private Reactions to Public Criticism" concludes that the crit is an essentially traumatizing procedure that has to be redesigned.⁴ Jeffrey Ochsner and Helena Webster take psychoanalytic approaches to the crit but focus on what the crit ought not to do, not on what it can do.⁵

In our research for this issue, we decided to go beyond the horizon of what has already been published by presenting interviews and solicited contributions from architects, students, and teachers, with an emphasis on ETH Zurich's Department of Architecture, which functioned as a field site (images from past crits at ETH Zurich illustrate this entire issue). We sought as wide a range of contradictory opinions as we could find, and there were many. In interviews we conducted early in our research, people were happy to condemn crits. The design professor Adam Caruso told us,

"When I taught at Harvard, which was ten years ago, the model you'd have, was twelve critics and a crying student. That was what final crits were like. ... The critics were mostly men, and they were mostly showing off for the benefit of the other critics. The students were doing their best ... literally crying."⁶ In contrast, Christoph Gantenbein spoke about the crits of Hans Kollhoff — who refused to do crits in the HIL building at ETH because, he maintained, in such an ugly building he could not talk about architecture. Gantenbein remarked,

*"Hans Kollhoff was a fantastic teacher ... it would be impossible to teach like that today because he was extremely personal. He would say of a project: 'Now this is just a kind of superficial conceit, [or] is it really you as an architect, as a future architect?' or 'Okay, forget everything and restart. This is your only chance to become an architect; really, today, get rid of this and start from a new one."*⁷

Such judgments sound extreme, but, according to Gantenbein, for some students they had a galvanizing rather than mortifying effect — perhaps because they dispensed with the details of the project to get to the implicit question underlying the ritual: *Do you really want to identify with this profession?* The situation it presents the student with is ambiguous. To succeed, they are expected to work out how to say "I am an architect," both as an assertion and as an act of submission.

The Parity Group's investigative work on crits was overtaken and interrupted, like so much else, by COVID-19 — and perhaps also by wider changes that were slowly grinding their way through

³ Patrick Flynn et al., eds., *Rethinking the Crit: New Pedagogies in Design Education* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2023), 43, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003289432>.

⁴ Kathryn H. Anthony, "Private Reactions to Public Criticism: Students, Faculty, and Practicing Architects State Their Views on Design Juries in Architectural Education," *Journal of Architectural Education* 40, no. 3 (1987), 2–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1987.10758454>.

⁵ Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, "Behind the Mask: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Interaction in the Design Studio," *Journal of Architectural Education* 53, no. 4 (2000), 194–206, <https://doi.org/10.1162/104648800564608>; Helena Webster, "The Analytics of Power," *Journal of Architectural Education* 60, no. 3 (2007), 21–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1531-314X.2007.00092.x>.

⁶ Adam Caruso, interview, Zurich, March 25, 2021.

⁷ Christoph Gantenbein, interview, Zurich, April 12, 2021.

society. We had organized trials of new formats and tests of different rules of conduct with various studios, but going online changed crits anyway. They became flat, often useful and focused, but lacking the physical experience of presenting in public. None of the ceremony or energy was present. Through the departmental Teaching Commission and the Parity Talks, we worked alongside others on topics such as mental health, workload, the expense of education, and what made the architectural canon. ⁸ After the pandemic, when crits were again held in person, some of the characteristics that had made crits seem so toxic had gone. On the other hand, that curious sense of flatness remained. Can you have the energy without the toxicity?

We interpret the crit as an instance of symbolic investiture. It remains an educational experience, but above all it is a ritual in which a student goes from “testing” ideas in a school to “submitting” ideas to a professional community. The acceptance or rejection of the project is tantamount to the acceptance or rejection of the student as an “architect,” even if only as an apprentice on their first steps toward becoming one. The crit is personal not because the student might overidentify with their individual work but because being an architect is not just a job but a calling, a profession in the true nineteenth-century sense of that word. By identifying with the project, the student becomes vulnerable, but at the same time it is a psychological route to giving the crit a liminal value. Through the game of performative utterance, the student asserts themselves as well as their ideas, and through doing so they gradually gain autonomy. At least, that is the ideal.

“Symbolic investiture” refers to the capacity of a person to “invest themselves in,” to hold as true and valid, the symbols that represent their identity. The most important kinds of symbolic investiture are granted in highly ritual ways. A wedding ceremony is an example, or the investiture of a judge in court. A priest who becomes an atheist or a judge who no longer believes in the law undergoes a crisis not only of professional enthusiasm but of personal identity. The crit is delicate. If it succeeds, the student feels like they are on the way to becoming an architect. That is why, when they turn bad, crits quickly slide from a focus on the project to statements like “I will not be an architect” or, worse, “you will never be an architect.”

The stories Caruso and Gantenbein told us draw from previous generations’ experiences, yet few students of architecture will be without their own tales of terrible crits, even though societal change has also brought a sharpened awareness of institutional bullying and abuses of power. Most critics, thankfully, now think twice before telling a student that they will never be an

⁸ The Teaching Commission (Unterrichtskommission, or UK) is a consultative body responsible for all teaching content in the department. As of spring 2024 it consists of eighteen members, including six professors, six assistants, and six students.

architect. Hierarchies and full-frontal teaching have ceded some space to horizontal learning and the stories of the students themselves. The task set by design studios has become much looser; students are often asked to set their own program, ask the right questions. This generates a dynamic where the student is the expert on their own project, the complexity of which insulates it from the criticism that guests are able to bring. For the guest of a studio, who is often not well-briefed and sometimes is unprepared for the endurance demanded by a full day (or multiple days) of jury work, providing insightful and critical perspectives in a sustained way is a challenging experience. In her interview in this issue, Momoyo Kaijima talks about some of the difficulties of being a critic. She emphasizes the need to modulate to what the student seems to be able to handle—which is especially true as the number of individual projects and expectations grow.

We witnessed a crisis of authority when student awareness of program, process, or method outstripped the critics' direct knowledge. Many students also seek to practice in ways the professors have no experience of. Students demand to be taught more contemporary and ecological construction techniques. In the meantime, this knowledge gap has been filled by inviting outside experts to crits. Power has become more diffuse within the crit, shifted away from the personal attitude of the individual designer toward the delivery of bureaucratic knowledge or the representative voice of a resident. Lukas Fink and Charlotte Schaeben's contribution to this issue explores the best of this tendency, using theatricality as a means to give meaning to the event. As parodied in DRAG lab's contribution, assistants remain mostly marginal and organizational, and professors increasingly take on only the responsibility of the professional wrap-up.⁹ The threads of symbolic investiture become more tangled.

Complicating matters further is the contemporary question of "refusal to build." Often explained in terms of environmentalism, we posit that the issue may also be something else. Similar to justifying decisions through program, if you do not build, if you assert "I do not want to be an architect", you can never be punitively told you will never be one. During the interview with Christoph Gantenbein, he told us that crits are "not a safe space, in the sense that you can't protect people from being confronted with questions, not only from people of authority, but also from yourself."¹⁰ The wish to build entraps the student in the mechanism of submission. If they no longer care about "authoring" architecture, then they are automatically emancipated from the authority of the teacher. This is doubtless simplistic, but it points to a crisis in architecture as a generational profession that educates its own

⁹ DRAG lab comprises people who are studying, teaching, or working at École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) to promote parity and diversity in the architecture school through readings and discussions.

¹⁰ Gantenbein, interview (see note 7).

successors. Students are afraid of committing to a profession they accuse of being environmentally destructive, while professors are unsure about what criteria architecture ought to satisfy.

One account of education holds that enlightenment and disenchantment move hand-in-hand and that students, upon realizing that the professors also do not know, are eventually free to explore and make their own mistakes. For some, this view of education may seem deeply melancholic or even cynical, as it reduces the exercise of education to little more than marking time in exchange for a couple of pieces of paper. The scarecrow in the *Wizard of Oz* asks the Wizard for a brain, and the Wizard says, "You don't want a brain, anyone can have a brain, you want something much better, a diploma." The scarecrow is then presented with a diploma and immediately begins to speak eloquently, bringing forth reams of equations. This can be read two ways. The cynical view holds that education is a waste of time, but another, more optimistic reading suggests that the scarecrow needs the ritual object to have the confidence to become who he already is.

If that is true, then the crit has to be accepted in its intensity, its openness to risk. As Brady Burroughs's contribution to the issue outlines, it should be enough to remind the jury that they are there to work, not to compete with one another or to determine internal hierarchies but to witness students. The professor is there to support but not to take the place of the students presenting; the possibility of failure is present. What is at stake is how the legitimacy of the crit can be strengthened, not because the professor needs to be the one who knows but so the student can have a meaningful experience. The part played by the teachers needs to be rediscovered. They are gifted designers, and they have something to teach beyond the technologies of ecological building.

Until very recently at ETH, first-year students presented using a microphone in front of the professor, the assistants, and several invited guests, while their work was screened on ten ceiling-mounted monitors for the benefit of the 350 other students watching. Former professor Miroslav Šik would arrange the student work on the wall from best to worst grade and hold the crits in that order. Some crit practices do seem unnecessarily daunting or cruel, giving the crit a lot of weight and not much benefit for the students' development. However, reducing the intensity so far that it becomes a routine exercise risks stripping the crit of all meaning. Individual solutions, worked out from studio to studio, need to be found, but one thing is certain: design professors ought to speak about design clearly, articulating

what it might mean in the twenty-first century—rather than shrinking behind a parapet of experts. This issue of *gta papers* will not tell you how to make a crit magical, but it does offer suggestions for how to reanimate it. Giving and taking critique is hard work—so, brief the critics, remember it's about students, and enjoy a meal together afterward.

