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In the Archive

Irina Davidovici

Here is a brief inventory of the archival photographs depicting crits in the gta Archive: none.

The archive, of course, holds many photographs: above all of buildings, but also of public and private events, landscapes, professional meetings and activities—all as one would expect of an archive that is largely made up of the bequests of private papers of well-known architects. But it contains no photographs of crits.

The closest we come is while leafing through a 1920 photo album that had once been the property of Professor Gustav Gull (1858–1942). Within it, three images depict the professional training at the school. In the first, Karl Moser, one of the most influential instigators of modernism at ETH Zurich, is shown in the act of teaching. Facing away from the camera and wearing a white smock, Moser is drawing at the table. ^{fig.1} An assistant sits opposite him, while three young men in suits and bow ties, presumably students, stand deferentially, observing his pencil. Apart from this small group, the atelier is empty, although the

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fig.1 Karl Moser and students in an ETH Zurich atelier, 1920. "Architekt: Abteilung Eidg. Tech. Hochschule Zürich," photo album belonging to Gustav Gull. gta Archive / ETH Zurich Gustav Gull

crowded desks with discarded instruments, open catalogs, and notes on the blackboard suggest the potential business of the room. The composition is hierarchical; its focus is on the small group, all gazes meeting at the master's hand.

The second image, pasted on the same page of the album, depicts a moment of more dispersed attention in another atelier—it could be next door—where students and assistants are mingling in various attitudes of work and contemplation, perhaps waiting for their turn. *fig. 2* Some are in discussion, others

fig. 2 Architecture students in an atelier at ETH Zurich, 1920. "Architekt: Abteilung Eidg. Tech. Hochschule Zürich," photo album belonging to Gustav Gull. gta Archive / ETH Zurich, Gustav Gull



sit working, and others lounge on the tables. A raffishly dressed chap leans over some elevations, clutching the bowl of his pipe. Unlike the first image, this one gives less indication as to who is the teacher and who is the student. The familiar setting of the architecture studios (tall windows, long, narrow tables, blackboards covered in chalk drawings, perspective drawings on the walls) is the common background to various poses of work and repose, suggesting the limited range of media by which architectural knowledge is imparted and absorbed. This second image is, in all probability, an anticipation of desk tutorials, the examination of work in progress. The image conveys no sense of public display. This is not a crit.

Crits—the baptism by fire of architectural education—persist long in the memory of those involved, teachers and students alike. Some anecdotes take on a life of their own, such as the (true) story of an elderly (male) architect bringing a young (female) student to tears, only to add, grimly, "looking at your work, I should do the crying." All architecture students, past or present, have their own memories of crits, whether triumphant or disastrous, cathartic or deflating. My own recollections from

the early 1990s remind me of how different the reviews at the Ion Mincu Institute in Bucharest were in comparison to those I experienced in Great Britain later on. The first were in a mode of pure deflection: as a game of ping-pong in which probing questions were hurled with the expectation that they would be caught and thrown (elegantly, one hoped) back at the teacher/tormentor. Only later, in Britain, did a kindly tutor teach me that crits could be understood as an instrument for learning. I realized that when comments were offered with respect—whether showing appreciation or concern—the mood changed. The crit could be reframed from weapon to tool, from a volley of bullets to a grown-up exchange of professional knowledge.

Back to the gta Archive, though. Where is the historical evidence of evolution in the rituals of the crit, from the origins of formal architectural education to today? How can it be that these key moments of architectural education are so seldom recorded, except (if at all) in laconic notes and opaque grading sheets? What is it about these most public exchanges between teachers and students that resists them being recorded and set aside for posterity—even at ETH Zurich, where the long and illustrious



fig.3 Live drawing class at ETH Zurich, 1920. "Architekt: Abteilung Eidg. Tech. Hochschule Zürich," photo album belonging to Gustav Gull. gta Archive / ETH Zurich, Gustav Gull

tradition of architectural education is chronicled through any number of documents, from teaching plans to student works? Could it be that crits demand privacy despite—or even because of—their publicness? Is the recording of these moments in which students are potentially at their most vulnerable deemed too

insensitive? Does the enforced intimacy of such moments and their potential cruelty deflect the gaze of the camera?

In a third photograph on the next page of the Gull album, the setting has changed. ^{fig. 3} This is no everyday atelier. Here the men (no women students are visible in this series) are taking a live drawing class. The easels are arranged in ascending semicircular rows, like an anatomical theater. The room is under the roof, with the angled back wall penetrated by dormer windows. All students, wearing suits and ties, are grouped around the naked male model, who sits almost penitently, a walking stick in his right hand. In the foreground, disembodied hands hover above unfinished drawings. Despite the men being of different ages, there is no clear hierarchy among them, except that of the dressed against the naked. Yet even here, a photographer is present.

These three images offer vestiges of scenes of instruction at ETH Zurich in the 1910s and 1920s. For someone looking at them through the contemporary experience of architecture training, the first two images are familiar enough as depictions of studio life. Though live drawing classes have long stopped, one could argue that the third photograph comes closest to our contemporary experience of the crit: a moment of almost indecent exposure when our work—and by extension, our self—is laid bare for all. This might explain the strange rarity of photographs of the crit in the gta Archive. No one is comfortable being photographed at the moment of judgment. In the crit, as in the confessional or a courtroom, an implicit restraint forbids the use of the camera. At the time such a photograph might be taken, the visual evidence becomes potentially indecent, an unacceptable intrusion upon the intimacy of truth.



