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## Debating Crits

### François Charbonnet, Momoyo Kaijima, Laurent Stalder, and Jeremy Waterfield

François Charbonnet, Momoyo Kaijima, and Laurent Stalder led a group of professors at ETH Zurich working on the strategic development of the undergraduate curriculum of the Department of Architecture. The editors of this issue of gta papers (Jeremy Waterfield and Amy Perkins) invited them to share their reflections on design juries. All three assert the importance of crits in their own architecture education despite the acknowledged imperfections of the procedure, and they affirm its future in teaching at ETH. The crit is above all endorsed as a moment for the production of knowledge and conversation. This interview took place in Stalder's office at ETH Zurich on May 18, 2022.

François Charbonnet is Professor of Architecture and Design at ETH Zurich and founding partner of the architectural practice Made In.

Momoyo Kaijima is Professor of Architectural Behaviorology at ETH Zurich and co-founder of Atelier Bow Wow in Tokyo.

Laurent Stalder is Professor of the Theory of Architecture at ETH Zurich.

**JW** (Jeremy Waterfield) What were your first experiences of crits?

**MK** (Momoyo Kaijima) In my bachelor's course, until my third year at Japan Women's University, students just submitted their work, and then grades and the best works were announced. I didn't have crits until my third year during an elective class in architectural design. In some other private universities that had a large number of students, a few select projects were given public crits after their submission. The others might at most have received simple feedback in person or by paper, but perhaps the justifications given along with the feedback could be construed as a certain kind of crit.

In my student period, when I couldn't get a crit, I put together a portfolio and went to see different architects to show them my work and get their opinion. I was just collecting what they thought to standardize my argument. This service wasn't provided by the school, so I had to do it myself. Although students may trust their tutors more because of their longer-standing relationships with them, it can be very helpful to have access to a second opinion when attempting to reach a goal or resolve a problem.

I came to ETH as a guest student in 1996. It was a wonderful time to arrive. I took Peter Märkli's studio. Marcel Meili was always there, and he and Peter were always talking about very difficult fundamental questions – What is a building? Is it just a roof? and so on – so everyone discussed their points and pointed at things, and this I very much enjoyed. This was critique among architects, a discussion of the process of design. We presented, but they also exchanged a lot of things. For me, these were lessons in finding criteria with which to evaluate work.

**FC** (François Charbonnet) I studied architecture at ETH Zurich from 1994 to 1999 but had previously begun studies in medicine, where there aren't crits.

**JW** Aren't there crits in medicine? Assessments where the student has to diagnose someone in front of a panel? It's interesting that there aren't many analogues to the crit in other disciplines.

**FC** I didn't get far enough in the study of medicine to perform such examinations. But my experience as a former ETH student has been, I think, quite ordinary. At the time, the crit was already—just as it is today—institutionalized as an oral exam during which an assessment of the outcome of a design process is issued. As such, the crit is merely a format, and it hasn't really evolved over time, though many studios—including ours—have attempted to alter the status quo by redefining its procedure, if only at the margin.

For obvious reasons, much emphasis is placed on the event, as it is unquestionably a special moment within the semester, a time when, as a student, you are expected to present and defend the product of a long process in an articulate and synthetic way. But what makes the crit so singular is also the emotional environment that it conveys. Much of this is due to the theatricality of the setting, its timing, and the rhetorical and figurative means of communication—but also the fact that the focus is on the product rather than the process, which leaves reviewers often speculating about the legitimacy of their judgments. As a result, the crit is an uncertain ritual, a thorny exercise, and at best a fragile balance between content and form. I do not mean to undermine its pedagogical value or its revelatory insights, but one should attempt to desacralize it, to avoid turning a contingent procedure into a sort of courthouse with a presumption of guilt.

**LS** (Laurent Stalder) I don't remember my personal experience of crits so well. And perhaps it's not even interesting. I just recall two approaches. The first one was based on a method that was taught during the semester, and the outcome was discussed and assessed for its coherence. As the requirement had been precisely given, the evaluation was well-circumscribed. The second approach was more concerned with developing a critical position as an architect and through architecture. Because both the procedure and the outcome were open, this type of education may have resulted in less concentrated but intellectually more challenging crits.

The great merit of the crit, as it is institutionalized in architectural schools, is the foregrounding of work that is publicly assessed through a confrontation of arguments. This public dimension seems fundamental; however, ideas can be tested and arguments can be sharpened in many contexts—for example,

in more intimate discussions between teacher and student or between colleagues. Later in my career as a PhD student, associate professor, and even now, I encountered this more informal kind of criticism.

Limiting crits to a specific format might be misleading. The value of a crit has a lot to do with authority, not simply as the exercise of power but, as Michel Serres reminds us, understood etymologically as a way of empowering: transmitting certain skills, legitimizing, and enabling one to follow one's own path.

**FC** Quite a rich experience for someone who doesn't remember!

## **The Criteria of Debate**

**LS** My experience is closely linked to individual positions that interact with each other. However, these positions would not interact directly but rather through space and time in relation to specific questions I have been investigating for years. One stands somewhere in between and must build up one's own position.

**JW** Now you are also often invited to crits as external guests. Do you then also see the tension that Laurent described between criteria based upon the application of a consistent method and being assessed from the idiosyncratic intellectual position of a respected teacher?

**MK** When I am a guest critic, I try to interpret what my colleagues are trying to teach and support them. I occasionally express my position. Sometimes people teach methods that are more objectifying than I think they should be; for example, by stipulating plans or images without people in them that give no idea of how the building will be used.

Simple questions are at the center of my teaching – Who uses these buildings? How does light come into these rooms? What is a typical day in the life of the building? – and so I bring them to the crits. But because three months is a relatively constrained amount of time and you cannot include every facet of architecture in that time, each studio must concentrate on its own questions.

There is also a difference between the midterm crits and the final crits. I also consider what semester the student is in and how much criticism they can cope with. You can tell from the student whether they are upset or enjoying themselves. I set my tone based on how much I think they can receive. If it appears that they have the capacity, I can go further into their work.

If I am at a different school, I can define my position more because I am an outsider. But as an internal guest at ETH or at other universities where I've taught, the presenters are also often my students, so there's rarely conflict.

**LS** One underestimates how difficult crits are from the outside. There is a limited amount of time to evaluate and make judgments about a process, an outcome, and the consistency between the two. The difficult part of evaluating the student's stance lies in trying to stay as general as possible in the comment so that it can be understood by all, and as specific as possible in the engagement with the individual project. A critique is a challenging exercise that does not always succeed because it is not a discussion of taste but rather an evaluation of a viewpoint, the route taken to get to this position, and the rigor with which it has been pursued.

A further challenge is the studio itself – its environment, its methodology, and its strategy. To be invited as a guest to a critique is an expression of trust, and the exercise, as I understand it, involves critical involvement with a continuous experience rather than a docile approval of any setting.

But participation in a crit does not always work out as you imagine. Sometimes, it is difficult to engage either because you do not understand the setting or because the setting is so well established that time is lacking to develop a position.

**FC** For all the reasons cited above, I tend to agree with your remark, but I also believe there must be a way to prevent such distressing situations by shifting the focus of the dialogue onto broader issues, tangential to the design itself or to the specific methodology of a studio. And some of the most stimulating crits are frequently those that do, in fact, come from a design outcome but only treat it as the starting point or the speculative input toward a more intricate subject; the dynamic of the dialogue can accordingly leave the realm of the particular to address more generic concerns and turn a hierarchical setting into a horizontal exchange. Ultimately, it is not the praising of a design – nor, symmetrically, its disparagement – that makes a crit a rewarding experience but rather the prospective trajectory that it suggests. Of course, this is not to say that the design project serves only as a convenient alibi for future cogitation; it could more purposefully serve as a pivotal – and occasionally elusive – anchor to the debate and thus prevent the crit from devolving into a series of exclusively antagonistic considerations. Such an approach typically prompts lively and articulate discussions around more than about the design itself, and can, as a result, be interesting to the majority of participants.

**LS** It might be a little bit more complicated. The most basic level of criticism is directed at the question of skills. The presentation of any project happens via plans, models, movies, text, and talk. These can be critically discussed and, as we are

in a school, also assessed. These skills are the fundamental prerequisites for expressing and understanding any intentions or positions, which are indeed, as François mentioned, at the core of the discussion.

**JW** So a process of finding and articulating a position is taking place. That can be done with regard to the studio, to which the student adopts a stance, or at the level of the individual student, in which case the crit can be reduced to evaluating the student's position rather than their work.

**MK** Crits aren't grading; crits create criteria around design. Some students misunderstand that; they think it's a grading system. Of course, some chairs are about performing and dialogue, and they grade on that and set it as part of the criteria for assessment. In many cases, in Peter Märkli's studio, for example, when the student presented a design, the crit discussion would be about how to better fulfill the design's potential. It might be specific to one element, a single window, for instance. A window integrates a lot of things, and if a student develops an interesting window, this integration can be expanded to include different or more complex topics in the design. If the student is unaware of these possibilities, we can indicate them. Of course, there are also many options; François sees something one way, and I see it another way. In the future, the student can choose to follow François, follow Laurent, or follow me. The discussion about how a building can be achieved, what would be a good resolution for a building, and what possibilities can be developed is the main thing. However, young students might not have much experience with oral presentations, or the crit might be very short, so they sometimes have difficulty reaching a high level of communication. No professor wants to be mean. Relating to judgment, François said courthouse ...

**FC** It can, under a given set of circumstances, be experienced as a trial-like procedure. I valued, and still do, the crits that were held at Hans Kollhoff's studio, but it sometimes felt much like a courtroom—the defendant, struck mute, standing in front of attorneys and prosecutors, judge and jury ... It often turned out to be, even if fully rewarding and informative, a rather tormenting experience.

**LS** But it was a highly differentiated and well-informed assessment.

## Going Public

**MK** A courthouse is associated with justice; maybe it's a fitting metaphor within Swiss democracy. My Japanese perception is that it can be more of an exchange for determining

criteria, a range, or targeting. Design must have a target. There are so many ways it can go, so it's necessary to set a goal in order to fine-tune a project. This tuning is a design skill for understanding society.

**LS** A crit is an act of making things public. Debating ideas is the purpose of any university. We not only produce projects but also contribute, so I hope, to the production of knowledge.

This exchange of ideas seems to be the most beneficial aspect of the crit — this forging of knowledge in public. It must be repeatedly and distinctly distinguished from two opposing tendencies: the first seeks to reduce such an exact discipline as architecture to some quantitative aspects; the second confounds personal taste with rigorously elaborated individual positions. It's very surprising that the authoritative judgments of some thirty years ago, which have been rightly criticized in the last few years, are today expressed as individual feelings or preferences that cannot be debated, as they are, well, personal.

**MK** Maybe this practice of public exposure also comes from architecture as a medium. Architecture ultimately is exposed on the street, and it produces a lot of networked effects on society that make it important to talk about who builds it, how it is made, and what materials are used. Architecture will be judged by society in the future, but, nonetheless, we need to test solutions against contemporary criteria. Juries or reviews are not the final authority but are useful critical spaces that a solution can go beyond.

Journals or exhibitions, for example, could sometimes replace the critical space. Perhaps for students, the crit is a way to acquire skills very quickly. I've now stopped doing formal reviews; I think the poster session is enough for them to learn how to convince. The students explain to one another, so they might give five variations of an oral presentation, and that can be helpful for them as they try to find their own language to explain the project.

In Peter Märkli's studio in 1996 to 1997, we talked a lot about the street in an urban context. For example, "A new building is coming to the street. How will it be changed or not?" The street in question — outside Zurich, at the end of Badenerstrasse — presented a very stable Swiss context, even if it was a very banal street. Even so, we tried to consider how one building could have a significant impact on the street. It is a familiar idea for me because, when I make a single-family home in Tokyo, it is also a representative of the Tokyo street and social life. A building can be judged or discussed in context.

Now, I think maybe we sometimes discuss how much impact the facade has, for example, but a lot of studios I visit ignore the

context, ignore the history, or miss the street itself. On the one hand, it's good. Everyone talks about the future, but where is the city? Where is the city planner? I come with foreign eyes, and after twenty years, a totally different discourse has arisen in the school. I don't know if it's good or bad.

## **Architectural Discourse and Its Discontents**

**JW** I think it's important to note that, in the environment in which critical discourse is conducted at the moment, there are few effective methods to dialectically move beyond differences of opinion, to work with flawed but best options, or to contextualize opinions. Those wider academic or societal trends are obviously palpable in the crit as well. Nonetheless, there is a tension between what you have been saying about the crit being a starting point for a wider discussion and the importance of the voice of the student. Even if that tension is just a result of the finite time available, I appreciate the recognition that the people presenting are adult citizens—as well as students—and therefore equal to their professors in at least one sense.

**LS** In the last five or six years, societal and environmental concerns raised by students have rightly complicated our understanding of the discipline. For a long time, architecture has been discussed as an autonomous discipline, the expression of a *métier* with its own rules and competencies. This, along with the status of the architect as an artist and the architectural project as a pure artwork, has been questioned in the last few years. This discussion is fundamental and has brought a very enriching transformation to the whole school. New voices have been brought in, conventions have been challenged, and existing positions have been differentiated.

However, at the same time, the discussions have become increasingly muddled. Discourse on architecture and architectural discourse have been flattened to become one. Political questions are discussed as architectural questions, personal opinions mixed with social questions, et cetera.

**JW** How would you propose educating students about the occasions when a political tool or an architectural tool is required? How do you teach that?

**MK** In 1996, Switzerland had a population of around six million; now it is over eight million. Two million in just twenty-five years. Japan's rate of population growth peaked in the 1970s, and the population is now declining. We have already built many things, so there is not so much pressure, which is somehow relaxing. It's also good that our architects go more into the issue of care and small-scale observation—the scale of maintaining a

society. That's the current moment in Japan. In 1996, Switzerland had a stagnating economy, but after the European Union a lot of money came to Switzerland. Switzerland is confronted with the question of how to maintain a boom. If you receive another two million people, it would be possible to keep going in the current system, but then what? Do you give up or lower the quality? Now might be a good moment to decide as a country about growth and stability. From the outside, I see that as a very interesting and challenging decision, and it also relates to the school. ETH is a public and federal school. Additionally, Switzerland has a rich culture and high standard of living. My question is: What do you want to keep? Even if you can't keep everything, at least you have to stabilize some components. We can teach a fragment of this. Swiss culture is very rural; there are many small towns and villages around, and this sort of diversity is a rich aspect of Switzerland. But if everywhere starts to look the same, then you lose your identity. I support emphasizing local culture and, of course, some new things. But maybe it needs a balance. I would ask students to take a stance on this.

**LS** The rapid growth of the population and corresponding urbanization, but also of wealth and the global standing of Switzerland, has dramatically altered the country in the last fifty years, bringing with it all these challenges that are raised today: energy, social equity, durability, et cetera. The main question for architects will be, how can they, through and by architecture, give an appropriate answer to them?

**FC** As an ETH student, I remember growing up in quite a polarized milieu, which did not originate in the design studios but from the chairs of history at the gta. I am not sure how much this discord was a matter of projection on the part of the students, but it was easy to take sides. Children of the Cold War are used to such polarization. The school was, as a result, quite a straightforward environment to navigate.

The department has undergone a substantial mutation during the last two decades, mostly for the better, with a renewed awareness of the challenges of our time and a more appropriately calibrated lineup of architectural positions among studios. But such diversity has a drawback in that it makes it more difficult to pinpoint a clear orientation. Additionally, compared to twenty-five years ago, students are considerably more politicized now. At the time, no one would really claim a voice in the governance of the institution or in the elaboration of a curriculum. The department seemed to be much less of a critical environment than it is today, and students would mostly depend on authority, which is interesting because authority is a dynamically acquired condition, as

opposed to power, which unfortunately can simply be declared. I sometimes wonder why the concept of authority is so negatively connotated today, whereas the notion of power, in all fairness, does not seem to be really questioned and still appears to be, for some mysterious reason, a desired goal. The multiplication of matters of concern within the department is undoubtedly a shift toward a more differentiated education, but it also bears witness to the ambivalence of our time.

**JW** I would say that authority in the school at the moment would come from being able to articulate four or five different viewpoints, to be able to articulate your own positions but also those of others. This entails being able to find a shared position with others but also acknowledging other groupings as existing, naming them. My personal political agenda in the school would be to move toward a point where there are some clear groupings so that you can know where you stand and have a healthy tension. As I see it, a lot of the controversy in the school comes down to the question of design: whether architecture is still capable of having and producing its own forms of knowledge or whether that has to come from the outside. And, if it comes from the outside, what sources feed the profession?

**LS** That's also the difficulty, because it is a profession. The education has to be, on the one hand, a professional one and, on the other hand, an academic one. There are things you have to know while designing.

**MK** Attacking the disease, not the patient ...

**LS** Yes. One of the main challenges is the good transmission of knowledge. Are the traditional methods of teacher, student, study, and exam the right way, or is the studio culture also a culture that could be introduced in other fields? History, for example, would very much benefit from the personal engagement of the students. However, this works only in very small groups. Thus, the size and organization of the school matter. Yet, while we put into question the doctrine of endless economic expansion, schools still struggle to even bring up "degrowth."

**MK** At the moment in the school, everyone tries to teach everything, so the curriculum is overloaded. But how to make a building—very simplified: foundations, columns, walls, windows, roof—that fundamental, very basic part could maybe be done in a more compact way. And then we could go to what the future might be, but that will come anyway from personal experience; for example, someone comes to work in Japan and witnesses a natural disaster. I can maybe guide them on how to respond to such a context, but I don't know how many people will come to work in Japan. Considering that there are only six years of curriculum,

we should define the core more clearly, and then the rest we can discuss.

**LS** Architectural education does not end with the master's diploma. For the good of society, we therefore have to give our students the technical and intellectual skills to pursue their interests independently once they graduate. But it is easier said than done.



