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Fun and Games

Christophe Van Gerrewey

Christophe Van Gerrewey is a Belgian architectural and literary theorist, writer, and architect.

1.

I remember one crit very well, although it took place twenty years ago. Perhaps because I was at the receiving end. To conclude an unremittingly negative review of a project for a beach cabin for lifeguards with a cafeteria and a first aid post, the studio professor dismissed me and my codesigner with the words, "Now go home and think about everything we've discussed." The look in his eyes, the tone of his voice, and the pace of his words were reassuring rather than menacing, and my colleague and I interpreted what he said as an absolution—we had done badly, but if we learned from our mistakes, he would let us pass, and at the end of the academic year we indeed received the lowest grade that does not imply a failure.

I continue to wonder if that evaluation was correct, and I still cannot see beach architecture of any kind that does not remind me of the design I made with a student I did not really get along with during a year that was not pleasant in other regards as well. I was twenty-one, an age at which one is still extremely receptive: everything that happens seems life-determining, and probably is. Most of us undergo crits in that intermediate period of our lives, between child- and adulthood, in which, hoping to launch ourselves from one into the other, we start to suspect that the two are impossible to separate. Every crit is an imperfect and incomplete initiation ritual, holding up—in the sense of vaunting but also withholding—a future state in which we will be educated and well-grounded, competent, and freed from self-doubt.

Supposedly, students are not the "subject" of crits and are not to be judged personally. This premise is based on the nearly utopian conviction that the work cannot be separated from the author. Does this apply to architecture students? It is nearly impossible not to take a crit personally. The problem might be that students remain in the audience of a crit and that their future trajectory is being pronounced upon. In the crit, even as you are told to divorce yourself from the "subject," your subjectivity is formed. Not only as an architect but also as a human being you are trained in developing a relationship with yourself. A crit is not about discovering truths or models that you can replicate until the day you die. Its real aim is to get you acquainted with your desires, skills, and imperfections, or, more precisely, to find a way to deal with them in such a manner that they can form the basis of your (professional) role within society.

I recall verbatim one other sentence from that unfortunate crit twenty years ago, uttered by an assistant, but that makes it no less impressive. We had designed a high, long black concrete wall that started in the dunes and disappeared during high tide into the sea – an upright pier on which square wooden volumes were mounted. We assumed that these boxes would not need columns and that the sand underneath would reshape itself, dictated by the winds. The assistant shrugged. “Dogs will piss there; that’s what will happen.” Did I, at that point, realize I would never become a “real” architect but rather someone who parasitically writes and reflects about the activities of architects? More likely I simply feared, hearing those words at the end of my third bachelor’s year, the premature conclusion of my entire career. Everything’s ending here – that is what I imagine must have flashed through my mind, accompanied by the depressing certainty that I had wasted my formative years, which should have been the most radiant and optimistic.

More substantially, that crit was an education in self-criticism. No matter how difficult the collaboration was, I had started to *like* the project we had made, with its frank formality and modest clarity that seemed appropriate when so close to the monumental sea. We end up loving whatever it is we invest time and effort in. The self-criticism induced by a crit (or by five years of continuous crits) is not only about learning from your mistakes. It is also about developing an attitude that constantly takes mistakes into account. And it is also about considering the possibility that you are walking into a blind alley, but in such a way that this doubt does not produce the dead end.

Before completing a project, an architect typically devises options and tests decisions. But you also need to be self-critical enough to question those steps, over and over. Inculcating that way of proceeding or that method is the main aim of the crit. Crits are organized not to teach you how to do architecture but to *program* you to independently organize crits, all on your own. Is this self-criticism a process of killing off bad options until one is *reconciled* with whatever remains? Does one start with enthusiasm, go through despair, and end with enthusiasm again? Is “feeling” ultimately part of it? It is all easier said than done, and self-criticism is not innocent. It can easily become self-denunciation. Everything depends on how voluntary the self-criticism is and to what ends power imbalances are deployed. To return to that crit from 2003: a higher authority decided that it had been enough. The orgy of self-criticism provoked by working on that beach station ultimately came to an end because the semester ended, but also because the professor decided to let us pass.

The crit as a shared exercise in self-criticism can be less malign than self-criticism endured in solitude. It is one of the reasons why architects work in teams. Unrelenting self-criticism is an ordeal if you have to keep making all the decisions by yourself, particularly if you have to make that final decision—if you have to stand up and declare the work done—all on your own. Self-criticism can turn into a detrimental habit that leads to nothing except unfinished projects, dark ruminations, frustrations piled in heaps—and finally to the decision to quit, to go and do something else. Is this the real reason why crits should be public—because self-criticism is unavoidable and, in isolation, interminable and unbearable?

2.

The shared and public character of crits also causes complications. The difficult thing is that at least one member of a design jury usually knows the student, and the work of that student, quite well and can be considered, if only to a small extent, as the coauthor of that work. After obtaining my degree in 2005, I taught studios for a few semesters. I had to coach, supervise, and accompany students, and then at the end of each semester the jury members disrupted our private relationship and, seemingly out of nowhere, started to criticize the project that had been so carefully developed week after week. Sometimes these critics revealed flaws that I had not noticed or that—possibly more shameful—I had noticed but had decided to keep to myself. This does not mean that I felt I co-owned the student's work, but I did end up feeling responsible for the outcome of each student's semester. If someone succeeded *cum laude*, I felt grateful and proud, because it must have meant, in one way or another, that I had done well too. Likewise, if someone failed, this was partly due to me; I should have provided better, clearer, and more effective criticism.

To put this experience in less personal terms, tutors engage in self-critique too. In certain instances, such as when a student shifts the blame for defects identified during a crit onto their tutor, this can create open conflict. I have experienced that only once. It was not an incidental reproach, since the student's decision to implicate me in the presentation was clear from the start: my name had been printed on every piece of paper attached to the wall and in the same font and size as the student's. The crit was in full swing, and the external critics had been steadily attacking the student for four or five minutes. I had stepped back because I felt, perhaps wrongly, that my part was over and that I could only witness what was unfolding. Then I suddenly heard

a strange sentence, uttered with conviction: "It was Christophe who forced me to do so." All heads turned in my direction, as if I would know how to respond. I do not remember which decision was referred to, but apparently it was something the student did not want to be criticized for because it was a part of the project that I had suggested. I do remember, however, that one jury member cut the matter short and came to my defense by replying that this was not the kind of argument one could make during a crit: the student bears full responsibility for the project and its presentation.

I am still thankful for that intervention, but I am equally unsure whether it was fair—perhaps a tutor *is* implicated in authorship and responsibility, and perhaps this complicated matter *should* become open to discussion. It would muddle quite a few things and bring to the surface pedagogic mechanisms that are, if not outright taboos, most often not openly discussed in studios or during crits, although they are the stuff that architecture history and theory are made of: emulation, filiation, transmission, influence, coercion, and adaptation. Imagine that the work of your studio professor was recently published in *El Croquis*: Would it not in that case be entirely justified to moot during a crit that you were led in this or that direction simply because that publication was so manifestly *out there*? Or—seen from the other side—how difficult is it as a tutor to passively watch a student project go completely against the grain of everything you stand for, especially when you intend to invite colleagues you admire to the final crit? The opposite can also be true: many an architect has stopped supervising studios because it became tedious to have to discuss, year after year, student projects that are little more than bland decoctions of the work of the tutor.

Emulation, filiation, transmission, influence, coercion, and adaptation are to varying extents present in every pedagogical process and even in every relationship premised on a difference in experience, age, entitlement, knowledge, or power. But during a crit they are concentrated and experienced to an intense and sometimes unbearable degree. Everybody participating in a crit posits ideals concerning architecture while simultaneously trying to infer the ideals in the minds of other participants. A critic or a tutor wants to know and to evaluate the criteria used by the student, while the student tries to anticipate what the other party wants. The big other here is that of architecture itself—this vague, theoretically endless group of ideals that a space or a building should embody. During a crit, and regarding architecture in general, there is no truth *out there*—all that exists are shared assumptions that can be expressed only partially in

words. A crit is a hallucination about architecture in which the desire to know what good architecture is, and how to realize it, is the collective motivation. You can never satisfy that desire all by yourself: every decision we take and discovery we make is partly attributable to others and formed by the images we have of and from them.

3.

All the above might suggest that a crit is a strained and uncomfortable event in which individuals—and fantasy versions of individuals, caricatures based on their roles, their self-projection, or others' projections upon them—are played off against one another. Sometimes. But a crit can also be a joyous event of intense knowledge acquisition and the creative formulation of words, concepts, and ideas. This happier outcome results from the magic mechanism that can occur in every piece of criticism: something that has been made by someone is discussed by someone else, and the result is a voyage of discovery. The critic develops insights by engaging with the work under review, and the one whose work is criticized comes to realize things about their own work that were previously unknown. A crit is—or can be—a mutual service, because the critic is gifted with a subject and because a project is transformed in the eyes of its creator. In both instances, the medium is language, and the result is either description or interpretation: *ekphrasis*, the artful description of a work of art; or *allegoresis*.

An architectural project is presented by two-dimensional drawings, sketches, and images (static or moving), by means of models, by means of numbers, and by means of words, spoken or printed, that are formulated to explain or to convince. The reactions to these diverse representations are verbal, although exceptions occur; for example, when a critic decides to make a drawing to improve on a floor plan or a section. The members of a jury can ask questions because they are trying to get a better understanding of the project, but in the end they are expected to say something about that project that has not been said before. For critics, a crit is not about evaluation, about agreeing on a grade. A crit is a laborious creative process that starts with looking and listening attentively and then converting these perceptions into words and ideas. A large part of that conversion process remains unspoken, like most thought processes. The time to talk is limited, and the crit's purpose is not to provide the critic with a stage to excel on—if a crit ends in applause, it should be for the student.

How can critics become better at contributing to a crit? What makes a crit successful, regardless of the grade that will be awarded? *wDescription* contributes to that success: summarize what it is that the student has come up with, what happens in the project, and what its effects could be. The *ekphrasis* voiced during a crit is a peculiar rhetorical exercise—in the first place, because the creator of the artwork discussed is not only present but is also involved in a sensitive pedagogical process. The description of an artwork always has an instructive purpose; for example, as part of an audio guide in a museum. The intention of an audio guide is to enable the museum visitors to be informed and to look better, to see what they have not yet seen. When a guest describes a project during a crit, the aim is also to make the student see things in another way. The difference is that the student has not only produced what is being described but has usually just given a description of that very project. The task of a critic is, therefore, to elaborate the project in a way that is not needlessly hurtful (without disguising defects) but is also *different* from what the student has said. The task of the critic is to use words that bring about a change in perspective, initially alienating the student from the project but also inciting—perhaps only many years later—more general thoughts about creation, about intention, about effect, about architecture. Much like my ill-fated beach cabin.

A more direct and possibly more aggressive way of provoking that shift is by offering not a description but an interpretation or *allegoresis*—a metaphorical exegesis in which a project is read as an allegory, as something that “symbolizes” something else, but never in a conclusive way. A crit can engender ideas and concepts that transcend the project under review. Every project and everything a student makes can be fertile, can engender ideas and bring about conversation. That conversation can become enriching for the architect, and also for the audience listening in, because it is accompanied by the collective production of surprising insights.

When a crit is an exchange of views and positions, that, too, can have unwanted consequences. It can be difficult not to let a crit derail into an argument between jury members in which the student’s work drops from view. A few years ago, I was nevertheless quite tempted. A colleague of mine was commenting on a project about which I have no recollection—the commentary made the lasting impression. Almost as an aside, the colleague drew up a definition of “urbanity,” stating that the only objective characteristic of a city is its density and implying that nothing can really be said about all the rest. I was appalled, not least because in this way virtually all architectural theory was brushed aside. Although I wanted to, I did not react. I was too conscious of the

possibility that my colleague's statement was intended as a productive provocation for the student. But the thought remained: Should that comment on urbanism have become the subject of the crit rather than the project at hand? Would it have led to a better and more generally applicable learning experience? Why not use the crit to define and subsequently discuss a more theoretical, general topic? If someone could attend all the thousands of crits that take place in 2023, all over the world, and then distill that experience into a comprehensive book, it would be the most important architectural publication of the twenty-first century.

Some book reviewers regard it as their mission to essay not about the books they review but about topics provided by those books—to wander off into the most diverse and unexpected corners, seemingly forgetting the ostensible subject of their review. This is similar to what can happen at a public meeting of a book club with the author present, if the writer is humble enough to give others control over the narrative and the discussion. The critic is expected to rate a book, but, more important, the critic also elaborates upon the text. In the end, both aspects—whether in the book review or in the crit—should not be mutually exclusive, because interpretation is a generous form of appreciation.

