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Critics: Read This!

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¹ The present text takes Queer Nation Manifesto as an inspiration for its literary style in form and language. See "Queers: Read This," Act Up NY, June 1990, <https://actupny.org/documents/QueersReadThis.pdf>.

² Helena Webster, "The Analytics of Power," *Journal of Architectural Education* 60 no. 3, (2007), 21–27.

³ Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁵ "Feminist killjoy" is a concept developed by Sarah Ahmed throughout her writing. The most sustained commentary can be found in *Living a Feminist Life*, which concludes with a killjoy survival kit and killjoy manifesto. Sarah Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 235–68.

How can I tell you, dear critic, that your very existence is vital to reinventing and queering the crit? ¹ How can I convince you that the crit—the central form of learning and valuing in architectural education—produces and reproduces unreflected values, practices, and privileges?

Despite its good intentions and well-earned successes, this formalized ritual for collective discussion and individual feedback can be alienating and exclusionary. Helena Webster claims that in its traditional form, the crit's mythology, spatial arrangement, choreography, language, and jury composition are a staging of asymmetrical power. ² Dana Cuff suggests that the charrette culture of long hours, competition, and sacrifice leading up to the crit sets precedents for (unhealthy) work habits and (unethical) working conditions later on in professional practice. ³ Luckily, Sara Ahmed offers us a way to reinhabit the space of the crit from a different (queer) angle through practices of reorientation and revaluing the things we take for granted. ⁴

You, dear critic, have a choice: to be complicit or to become the fierce queer critic you were meant to be! Go ahead, rethink the crit and the power you hold. That's it. You're almost there!

Who are you, queer critic? Your humor in the face of architects who take themselves too seriously is liberating. Your feminist killjoy persistence against narrow-minded beliefs and dogmatic ideas is badass! ⁵ Your curiosity for the values and perspectives that come from recognizing difference is golden. And every day that you wake up, go to a crit, and risk "failure" in the expected performance as critic, you change what the crit was, is, and can be!

There is little in this architectural world, dear queer critic, that nurtures or supports your insistence that formal virtuosity and tectonic bravado are just "meh," without critical practice and positioning. There are few extra institutional resources to challenge your own assumptions, to question your own habits, or to abandon your go-to examples. As a complicit critic, you could have just shrugged your shoulders and rolled your eyes at attempts to change the way things are usually done—glided along in your own comfort zone and accepted givens without questioning motives or implications, overlooking opportunities for alternative practices and stifling your own creativity and vulnerability in the name of disciplinary obedience. But the queer critic isn't fooled! The complicit critic's position is just as subjective, and the architectural baggage it carries is heavy.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE AND USEFUL TIPS FOR THE QUEER CRITIC

1. Face the group. Get up! Move your chair if you have to. Or better yet, rearrange the space of the crit completely. Speak *with* everyone rather than *at* someone. And follow the crit schedule! Respect and fairness with others' time matters.
2. If a student is struggling, there is always something encouraging to say. Find it! Ask questions or share one of your own heroic failures. Reassure students that critique is for learning and sharing, not showing off what you already know.
3. Do not begin a crit without clarifying your position! Use phrases like, "In my opinion," "For me," or "From my area of interest" to remind yourself and others of the subjective nature of critique.
4. Dare to have honest conversations about unhealthy work habits, even if the result of overwork and exhaustion receives praise. Include the importance of collaboration and solidarity with those whose (gendered, racialized, material) conditions preclude such individual efforts.
5. Do not look the other way when it comes to calling out assumptions of who and *what* are part of the architectural "family." Lift other voices, see other places, and value other experiences. Raise questions about sustainable practices. Risk being a *feminist killjoy*.
6. Consider carefully what you wear and the power it projects. Critics can be nervous too, but try to resist armoring up! Architect Barbie can wear pink, and so can you. Or why not free your inner drama queen, using costumes and role play to shift positions and queer the performance of the crit?
7. Most importantly, have fun and bring your sense of humor! Check the power and expectations of "the expert" at the door and be vulnerable. Extend the same invitation to students and colleagues, put yourself out there, and learn to laugh at your own expense.



A Jury of Queer Critics Will Lift You Up

Being a queer critic is about asking questions that can empower and motivate, not about flexing your critical muscles and having all the answers. Being a queer critic is about encouraging risk and experimentation without shaming failed attempts. Being a queer critic is about being generous in an exchange that chooses dialogue over monologue and conversation over judgment. Being a queer critic is about supporting collaboration and collective intelligence, not reinforcing myths of the creative genius. Being a queer critic is about challenging traditional forms of architectural representation that reek of privilege and commodification in order to include cultures, peoples, and sensitivities outside the architectural canon. Being a queer critic is about making your own position clear and knowing that you can still talk about anything, as long as you do it from somewhere.

Every time you balance discussions about experimentation in architectural expression with concerns about equitable and sustainable materials and building processes, congratulations, dear queer critic, you are doing the work! Every time you enter the crit with an ambition to learn something new, you're here, you're queer, you're crushin' it! Every time you offer constructive criticism and manage to say it with love, you're a goddamn superstar. And remember, in the wise words of RuPaul, "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an Amen up in here?"

You Can Learn More from One Queer Heroic Failure than an Entire Education of Complicit Successes

Being a queer critic takes a lot of energy, imagination, and hard work. It is a constant struggle to reorganize and rethink the roles and structure of the crit, and to deliver relevant architectural critiques to meet today's challenges, but it's so worth it. And yes, it's easy to fall back into the familiar space of the complicit critic on occasion, but don't let that stop you. Go on, that's it! Step up and be the fierce queer critic we all need, the one you know you can be! You got this.

I want us to be better critics. I want us to change the culture of the crit. It's time to queer the crit(ic). Let's start by posting this guide outside every design jury.