

"What is the role of critique in your pedagogy, Mr. Lehnerer?"

Autor(en): **Lehnerer, Alex / Bianchi, Vincent / Salzmann, Yann**

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«What is the role of critique in your pedagogy, Mr. Lehnerer?»

«We could easily stop here by saying «yes, of course, we want critical architects», however the «how» and «what for» seem to remain as itchy as they are. First of all, I think there are different ways of understanding criticism. I was socialised with an architectural discourse in the US, where critique is not necessarily understood as a negative thing. Here, however, criticism tends to be associated differently: To criticise means to oppose—whereas the beauty of criticism is that it can be proactive. It has the potential to produce work.

There are two things that I can mention that we try to do within the chair in that regard. When we set a task, we never argue out of necessity. We never say that Zürich needs such a building or a program because there is a lack of it. We never argue out of the idea that we need to provide the city or the context with a certain solution. Otherwise you can just say: «I am fulfilling a task». That's what practice is full of—in competitions, in serving clients, etc: you are asked for a solution and you deliver it. However, a good school also exists to experience the opposite.

In 2016, we asked our students to design a church; there are already 72 churches in the city of Zurich, it does not need another one. However, we wanted them to make another one because they could no longer safely argue that another piece of that program is needed. They had to find some other justification, which could be the opposite of necessity: desire. «I want this». Then you can no longer hide behind other people's wishes or commissions. This creates a certain discomfort, leading people to wonder: «Why should I do this? What else can I express with that project?». You cannot fulfill a task anymore but you have the opportunity to raise your own question. That is one way of getting into a critical architectural project. I believe that it is more important for the project to be critical than it is for the student to be a critical person. Don't get me wrong, what I mean is that I do not want criticality or self-criticality to be expressed through doubt rather than action. The doubt, the questions, and this self-critical approach should be expressed projectively. Furthermore, once a project starts to speak with itself, it naturally gains a certain «autonomy» that our discipline looks for so eagerly.

The most beautiful piece on criticality I have ever read is a text by Jorge Silvetti, called «The Beauty of Shadows» from 1977. He has this idea that criticism emerges from the act of design itself. He talks about «criticism from within», that is, your own doing is criticising the core of the discipline. You do not point at something outside your world but at something that is deeply intriguing to you within your own work. I find it very nice to understand criticism as an act of doing. Not as a statement or a commentary. You take something that appears utterly normal and ubiquitous, then you try to subvert it. There are certain techniques you can employ to do that. Exaggeration is one. You can exaggerate something you dislike in an extreme way to

turn it into something beautiful. This counter-intuition creates a certain friction to our overly intuitive world. Thereby it turns a project into a manifesto with an anti-theoretical value.

There is a difference between studio teaching and diploma teaching. When I started teaching at ETH, I was opposed to the set diploma. I received my education in schools where there were only free diplomas. Ironically, over the last few years, I started liking the form of set diploma, huh! That almost rigid question gives you the first precondition to challenge it, to try and subvert the task. Which allows for a critical and self-conscious contribution. A school is an institution and provides boundaries. So called «total freedom» from the beginning isn't helpful, it is much rather extremely boring. Certain ties and conditions have to be established, so that you can then work against them. It is something that works quite well in the admittedly deterministic mode of our diplomas. Everybody receives the same task. What will they do with it? It allows you to act in a subversive way, to be productive within the range of your skills and sensibility. It has now developed into a game. It's almost a little counter productive that the diploma projects are becoming increasingly freely set. I never thought I would ever say things like this...

There is a certain truth that architecture cannot escape; it always serves power. We are obliged to capital. Nothing works without funding, you need a client. It is when we capture private investments for public pleasures, that we can make a contribution. There has to be this counter-intuitive subversion of the task, in order to smuggle in other qualities, that might be missing in the brief. This is very beautiful as a project. It does not matter whether it's a small object or a big plan, as long as you have that kind of ambition. I fully agree with the idea that a school should create room for that in the students' minds. The statement that architecture serves power cannot be abolished or ignored. You have to trick it somehow. It is only then that the critical architecture we are all interested in can take place.»

This text is taken from the interview with Alex Lehnerer led at ETH Hönggerberg the 13th of June 2017 by Vincent Bianchi and Yann Salzmann.