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«We should embrace discomfort as an exciting new window perhaps into a different reality, a future more universal form of social comfort»

SAFE SPACE AND THE ECONOMY OF EMOTION

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The Parity Group is a grassroots initiative formed at the Department of Architecture (D-ARCH) at ETH Zurich in 2016. It is a fluid group of students, assistants, and professors from the department who are dedicated to discuss issues around gender equality and diversity in architecture within the D-ARCH at ETH Zurich.

In 2021 a working group of the Parity Group at the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich was formed to deliver a «Parity Season». This was a lecture series aimed to introduce and explore key concepts from gender and diversity studies. These lectures, titled «The Male Gaze», «Quota», «White Innocence», and «Intersectionality», were always followed by close discussion groups. These explored the topics at hand further, in relation to both individuals' experiences, and how these themes were present within the Department. For us, as participants and organisers of those lectures and talks, «The Season» became a place of safety and strength, where we could come together to address topics which feel heavy to carry alone. We were interested in writing from this experience, about the notion of safe space; to consider how it might or might not relate to comfort and discomfort; and to suggest that perhaps far from being only a spatial concept, safe spaces — and with that architectural practice — might be understood beyond the built environment.

Architecture is political, in that it is the result of many people and processes. Its final form cannot be detached from ideological stance or political consequence. This text is a call for the members of the Department of Architecture (D-ARCH) at ETH Zurich to recognize the political as part of the academic and architectural reality in which they operate. Perhaps in recognizing that we can all appreciate that we have the possibility to design the space of discourse, dialogue and relation to one another just as much as we can design architectural space.

As students we are constantly navigating a spectrum of (dis-)comfort. Architectural education deals in part with how to acquire knowledge about basic aspects of building, providing shelter, ascertaining and achieving thermal comfort. But comfort as we perceive it in this context predominantly stands in relation to intersecting social, political and cultural realities, overlaying shared and public spaces. In this sense comfort relates to the level of entitlement a person may be able to feel. It relates to how far their presence is accepted or tolerated in societally coded space. Architects often claim they can address these problems of social (dis-)comfort through spatial design practice, however they cannot achieve this with traditional tools alone. Architecture can provide accessibility, highlighting and formalising, for example, an anti-ableist perspective into the built environment. By doing so, positioning a building within a context, or offering a social critique more theoretically. Architecture manifesting a criticism can help us grasp the complexity of our environment; but it does not allow us to drive change within social and cultural prejudices — built architecture has its limits. In order to challenge norms and prejudices — a prerequisite for them to design differently — architects must also engage in non-design ways.

The academy as a legitimising space, where future generations of the profession are educated, plays a central role in shaping what are seen as architects' responsibilities. There is value then, in us, its members, questioning the social and cultural status quo within D-ARCH — because the changes we make at ETH Zurich will be carried outwards into architecture offices all over the

world. And although it may be uncomfortable to bear with it, to carry those ideas along we shouldn't shy away from the complexity of reimagining our practice. We should embrace discomfort as an exciting new window perhaps into a different reality, a future more universal form of social comfort.

Class, gender, and diversity, among other markers of identity, can all play a role in influencing how an individual might relate to any given space. As an internationally renowned institution, ETH Zurich attracts people from all over the world; relatedly, Switzerland — despite its dominant political stance sometimes pretending otherwise — is a very diverse place. With this diversity of attendance at ETH, pressure is building on a time-honoured vision of the Architecture Department, one designed for the rules and mores of a white, middle-class and male social group. The essentialist nature of these markers, and the materialist realities of class, make it difficult for some people to feel at home within the structures of the institution. Attending university is to some degree about embracing changes in yourself, but when you cannot change your sex, or the color of your skin your discomfort may grow. ETH Zurich has tried to put strategies in place to mitigate the effects of this pressure, but their effectiveness is debatable when the logics of a neo-liberal university management also place a premium on many of the aspects which also drive discomfort.⁽¹⁾ One of the primary underlying discomforts of all these others is the effect of overwork on mental health. It is widely known that architecture students invest sleepless nights competing to bring their drawings and models to higher and higher standards. Arguably, with limited assistance in how to learn to do so efficiently, overworking and overproducing have consequences on a student's mental health, reducing valuable recreation time necessary for mental rebalancing. Although this situation has already changed and improved a great deal, the push for more, and more production, from professors and assistants, still encourages students in this direction.

If this is the base note of discomfort, it can be sharpened when discomfort also results from not identifying with the prevailing «norms» in a competitive, heteronormative, cis-gendered culture. Besides the studio culture, these constructs are also embedded within the predominantly eurocentric architecture discourse at the department which, despite admirable attempts to change this culture, still falls short of providing a diversity of architectural role models outside of the traditional canon.

Normalising questioning the causes of these discomforts is important, because the more someone deviates from the normative identity, the higher the likelihood that their identity will intersect with more and more points of discomfort. The more this is the case the greater the additional effort required just to keep abreast of the average. If you are worrying about whether you can afford lunch, you may not be concentrating in your tutorial at 11:45; and if your white-male assistant refuses to engage with value systems not their own, calling them bad taste, you'll probably get a lower grade in the end. Students, teaching staff and professors have all become increasingly aware of the importance of mental wellbeing and are trying to improve the situation which a recent departmental survey carried out by architektura

showed to be rather dire. As much as the attainment of mental and physical comfort and wellbeing is influenced by the social and cultural identities that individuals carry with them, however — the primary sites of address from the side of many in the department — the main driver of discomfort, the relentless drive for «excellence» remains unaddressed within the discourse at the Department.

In recent times, the expression safe space has been prominently discussed in the context of academia. Activist groups, mostly from American universities, vocalize the need for safe spaces. Institutions create those spaces, claiming they play a key role in creating a safe environment. Unfortunately, the term has lost much of its original meaning through over-use, and the institutions' creation of such a space is often no more than gender, or queer, or diversity washing without formally acknowledging complicity with and the need to solve gender and diversity issues. Such efforts can even undermine an understanding of the complexity of these issues and lead to a sweeping under the carpet or silencing of activists.

Going back to their origins, «the concept of safe space emerged in the women's movement in the late twentieth century. In feminist, queer, and civil rights movements an understanding of safe space has been developed, that is associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment. This type of safe space also encourages a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance.»⁽²⁾ A safe environment to retreat to enable one to be brave. One example of creating safe spaces came from the American women's rights movement's practice of «bold walking», which came about first in the Anti-Rape Week in Washington DC, in 1981. The protest marchers reclaimed streets, where women had been threatened, or sexually assaulted. During the marches, women took routes that refused to avoid spaces that were socially coded as unsafe for them, walking through those spaces at night collectively. With this action women reclaimed public space, redefining it, for a time, on their own terms as a geographically undefined safe space.⁽³⁾

The notion of safe space is a complex and difficult to grasp strategic tool. We do not want to propose either an alternative definition of safe space or how such a physical space might look like at D-ARCH. The difficulty lies within the words themselves. First, the term «safe» implies that a particular condition can be guaranteed when, in fact, no one can truly promise this to anyone.⁽⁴⁾ Secondly, the emphasis on «space» can be misleading — safe spaces often extend beyond a specific spatial context. For our purposes we would suggest value in safe spaces emerging from a static understanding, towards one that is temporally specific, and fluid. The walls that hold these spaces together consist of the shared discussions that are held and the actions these generate; protests, manifestos, educational lectures — to name a few — which follow them. These spaces are about how we speak to one another, how we relate to one another, or create for one another a space in which we can be ourselves, including our whole context. The ways we communicate «are just as constructed and designed»,⁽⁵⁾ as the analogue or digital space where

those conversations happen. Just as we learn to design by understanding the processes which generate form, through an attention to our underlying contexts we can begin to choose the form of the communication we share with one another.

In that understanding, safe spaces could become an important tool with which to redefine the social and cultural relations that determine the comfort of all members of D-ARCH. This safe space might allow people to ease some of the pressure they experience. «We need places where we can let our guard down, and not be on the constant defensive, for our psychological wellbeing». ⁽⁶⁾ Without tackling overwork in a fundamental way, or creating spaces within its culture that are not about production, the architecture practice — for all its attempts to diversify and itself — will end up the same, but with a few more burned-out people. All the while congratulating itself on its leaps forward, while avoiding real change. Safe spaces are constantly created by collectives for themselves, often by people themselves dealing with a high pressure of discomfort. The positive effects of these shared spaces of discourse allow people to engage politically, something that is often too gruelling to do alone, without support. We would argue that such political engagement must start to become a normal part of the understanding of what it means to be an architect in the Department, a shift of focus that might begin to create a sustainable and equitable environment in the profession outside.

We call on the D-ARCH to recognize and support the political actions of its members which are already taking place, encouraging the construction of safe spaces within the dialogues they develop. We call on the D-ARCH to make available physical space, to accommodate all members according to their needs, and to allow independent actions to take place within those spaces as far as is possible. Where safe spaces exist, their value should be acknowledged and their different needs respected. We believe that only through valuing spaces where we can rest, where we can gain and regain energy, can architectural culture become something beyond a mere form of economy. We will have to listen to those who speak up, allow them to undermine the system. Let us embrace political action as a valid architectural tool, and let's strive to design the cultural space of the conversations we share with each other just as much as the physical spaces we have those conversations in.

