

**Crit**

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# The Architecture Foundation presents six provocations questioning the culture of the crit in British architecture schools

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There is nothing architects like more than to grumble about the rarefied groves of academe. Architectural education is the punching bag of the profession, variously accused of being unfit for purpose, too whimsical, misaligned with practice etc. For the Architecture Foundation, this discourse is uninteresting, we believe British architectural education, while never perfect, gets a lot right and should be celebrated and criticised with generosity.

The crit, however, is an iconic moment of contention in the trajectory of all students and often a scene of high octane confrontations. It is architecture education at its rawest and least couched in wider university culture. When graduates recount their time as students, it is crits that seem to stick out for better, and often for worse.

In this small book we bring together six reflections on the crit as a format and phenomenon from veteran critics, current students, recent graduates and experienced teachers. We hope the mini polemics collected in *Crit Critique* will provide useful provocations, challenging our crit culture and its contested contribution to the discipline.

# **You're crying? I'm the Head of School, I should be crying!**

After traversing the emotional assault course of five years of student crits, the young architect is frequently more skilled in the art of advocacy than design. Jeremy Dixon once remarked on this imbalance with reference to Netherfield, the 1000-home estate in Milton Keynes, which he and a group of other recent AA graduates designed in the early seventies. Having battled the likes of Peter Cook and Cedric Price over years of AA juries, Dixon and his colleagues had developed Churchillian powers of persuasion and an adamantine carapace of self-belief. The only problem - as soon became clear once Netherfield was built - was that their design proved a technical and urbanistic calamity.

But if the skills that the aspiring architect acquires through subjecting their projects to public review are not without danger, the expectation that they should articulate and defend their work remains sound. As Adolf Loos wrote: "Good architecture can be described. It doesn't have to be drawn. The Pantheon can be described. Secessionist buildings cannot." The student's readiness to abandon the comforts of the privately-nurtured drawing and engage others in dialogue represents a vital first step in situating their work within the collective project of the city.

Certain critics relish the public and adversarial nature of the exercise more than others. Isi Metzstein concluded one presentation at the University of Edinburgh with the words: "You're crying? I'm the Head of School, I should be crying!" Kevin Rhowbotham secured a life-time ban from the Royal College of Art after reducing a fellow juror to tears. A Facebook site collates Valerio Olgiati's withering put-downs. Many are blackly entertaining but one can't help thinking about the young, and often female, person on the receiving end. Whatever other lessons a student crit imparts, one that seems inextricably bound up with the format is the injunction to "man up".

# Students normalise amongst themselves

At its best, a crit is a tool for speeding up a student's decision-making process in order to produce a coherent output, an opportunity to present to respected practitioners and good practice in selling an idea. At its worst, it is a distracting, insular exercise in which students rank themselves against their peers based on the opinions of people who are irrelevant to their research.

The crit generally follows a familiar format; selected work is printed and pinned to a wall, students present one after another within a time allowance and a panel of external critics pass judgement. Students normalise amongst themselves – “how many sheets are you pinning up?” they ask each other. “Is anyone showing a site plan?” This set of common constraints encourages direct comparison and presents the crit as a competition in which students as individuals have little or no agency.

Often this is the only point at which projects are tested against an audience outside the immediate studio group and tutors. The big reveal is highly pressured and becomes a priority, distracting efforts away from project development and concentrating them on presentation. Emphasis is on the performance. A good crit is measured on positive audience reaction rather than a productive exchange of ideas. This should not be the only way of assessing a project's success nor producing better architects. We should be more rigorous with our analysis, broadening the conversation and engaging with others continually rather than pinning all hopes on 20 minutes of echo chamber airtime once a month or less.

We must be more aware of how we're measuring our work. The format of the traditional crit is unimaginative, unproductive and banal. We need to be more creative.

Ellie Howard

# Students can never simply admit, “I don’t know”

On crit day, we students find ourselves plunged into an odd performance, where visiting critics attack our ideas while we frantically defend them. This form of critique sets us in the mindset of convincing ourselves that our proposal represents an immaculate *raison d’etre*. Any uncertainty is a heinous flaw – we must frame our work as fully resolved, building a fort around our untouchably perfect project. The critics then are reduced to the role of battering rams, attempting to locate weak spots in our thinking and apply destructive pressure to reveal our shameful ignorance.

This embedding of defensiveness is counter-productive. The more the student builds their argument purely to rebut possible attacks the harder it becomes to embrace sudden turns that could potentially take the project to a new level. Beating back the critics into muted approval is considered a triumph. Acknowledging a weak component of the project and choosing to change tack is considered a disaster.

Furthermore, this “defence default” demands students can never simply admit “I don’t know”. It discourages us from questioning, revisiting and reconsidering our work post-crit, as to do so is tantamount to conceding failure.

Whether it is a problem of terminology or a deeper attitude towards crits, the format of prosecution and defence needs to be reexamined. We should place the student in a position where their work is the centre of constructive discussion and debate, not their pride.

Ameneh Solati

# We down a black coffee and dive in

I am sometimes invited to crit students around and beyond London. While the style, pedagogy and quality of the work varies, one thing remains remarkably consistent. Never is the contribution of the critic questions. We typically arrive having done minimal preparation, down a black coffee and dive straight in. A day of sometimes combative, sometimes discursive, always exhausting conversation later, we retire for a pint – job done. There is no warm-up round, no guidebook and the only way to learn the craft is to practice on live subjects: hapless architecture students.

In all this I am often struck at how little feedback the critics receive. Critting is hard and doesn't come naturally – some people are extremely good at it, others are spectacularly awful. Why then do we spend so little time honing our technique, advising each other as well as the students? Why are tutors so reluctant to guide the input of their invited critics or to admonish us when we fuck up (which we often do)?

Is it simply that most critics are unpaid, so tutors resort to calling-in favours from friends and are, therefore, in a compromised position too delicate to call out an indulgent or inattentive critic? Or is there some deeper problem which causes the critic to be venerated beyond the level of constructive feedback? Is it ego? Fear of causing offence? Or is the whole artifice of the crit merely a construct to impose an artificial deadline on the student – the critic is simply enacting a theatrical role like a clockwork toy. As we ponder the purpose and potential of the architecture crit, we must also ask: who critiques the critic?

Phineas Harper

# The crit stands for everything that is wrong with architectural education

“Have you had a crit yet?” “Oh, you don’t want him for a crit!” “Yeah she’s always harsh in crits”. Phrases floating the corridors of architecture schools exemplify the theatrical crescendo that foreshadows a crit. From day one of architecture school there is an unnecessarily climactic focus placed on this ten-minute period where students are aiming to please all with a work in progress, while unprepared and anonymous visiting tutors arrive to completely expel any hope of consensus. Maybe this scenario represents an informative simulacrum, intended to mimic architect-client relations, imparting the wisdom of a happy medium. (Or maybe we’re just expected to think that.) You can understand the frustration when a student hasn’t put the effort in. However, should those slaving away for weeks on end really be expected to bow down and absorb the comments of a critic briefed merely minutes beforehand? What use do remarks from a PhD candidate studying thermal comfort have on the grounding theory of a project? Why should regurgitated references from a tutor who last practised four decades ago be taken on board?

Currently the crit stands for everything that is wrong with architectural education. It promotes the idea of a lone genius striving for a finished object. The crit shouldn’t act as an ultimatum but as a yardstick. A change to its image could signify a wider change in the thinking around the future of architectural education.

@post\_crit

# Crits can be a terrible parody of the worst aspects of practice

I have been trying to write something clever about crits and have given up. I am sure others will tackle the the abuse of power and egoism that can compromise crits and make them a terrible parody of the worst aspects of practice.

For my part I would like crits to be celebratory and respectful of each student and the effort they and their tutors have made. I try not to crit from prejudice or hide behind the internal dialogue of architectural education. If possible I relate my comments to the society students are a part of and will serve, and look forward to their future practice.

If a crit becomes about power and ego, including mine, then I hope it is noticed and I am taken to task. I will apologise and try to do better.

Robert Mull

**#megacrit**