



## Lara Schrijver

TU Delft

*Lara Schrijver is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Architecture of the TU Delft. She is one of three program leaders for a new research program in the department of architecture, 'The Architectural Project and its Foundations'. Schrijver holds degrees in architecture from Princeton University and the TU Delft. She received her Ph.D. from the TU Eindhoven in 2005. Schrijver has taught design and theory courses, and contributed to conferences in the Netherlands as well as abroad.*

*She was an editor for OASE, journal for architecture, for ten years, and was co-organizer of the 2006 conference 'The Projective Landscape'. Her current work revolves around the role of architecture in the city, and its responsibility in defining the public domain. Her first book, *Radical Games*, on the influence of the 1960s on contemporary discourse, is forthcoming in the spring of 2009.*

# ARCHITECTURE: PROJECTIVE, CRITICAL OR CRAFT?

Certain notions seem to have been returning throughout the architecture debates of the past five years, including most notably the 'post-critical', the 'projective', and the 'post-theoretical'. These phrases have been used alternately to delineate a new direction in architectural thinking, or as an opposition to ambiguous interpretations of the 'critical'. Insofar as it can be addressed as a coherent whole, the current debate on 'post-critical' and 'projective' architecture often treats the two notions as interchangeable despite their distinctions.

This conflation has made it perhaps too easy to dismiss both the projective and the post-critical, simply because there is a strong faith in a generic sense of critical perception that seems crucial to the practice of architecture. At the same time this generalized critical view has become conflated with a much more insidious form of criticality that has misdirected our attention from the issues at hand. Simply dismissing the notion of the projective does not do it justice; there is some value in its rethinking of the discourse, and might even be emblematic for a specific issue confronting architecture (in practice and in discourse) today. Therefore this paper begins quite simply by teasing out what I think is still of value in the projective debate. I will hold primarily to the term 'projective', as there is something distinct about the projective that appears to suggest a more productive orientation towards architecture and its discourse. Where the 'post-critical' largely appears to dismiss the previous paradigm of the so-called 'critical', the projective attempts to incorporate criticality and re-inscribe it directly within the disciplinary boundaries of architecture.

The notion of criticality that has become central in the last half of the twentieth century derives from a neo-Marxist discourse that presumes the presence of a false consciousness. The distinction is made between affirmation and negation—to operate within existing conditions without critiquing (in the grand sense) its conditions places one in the affirmative camp, while self-consciously manipulating existing codes in order to evoke a consciousness of existing preconceptions is the desirable outcome of an artistic endeavor: the artist (or the architect) is given a Nietzschean position of ‘lifting the veil’ of an illusory reality. In most cases, this revolves around societal conditions: revealing oppressions and preconceptions that perpetuate our unequal divisions of power and affluence, in particular in the contemporary conditions of late capitalism, which seem to somehow incorporate every form of critique that is presented.

Now in a generic sense, the desire to be critical is almost a truism. It seems almost trivial to note that most architects would at least presume a critical (reflective, thinking, considered) position in the world. That they would typically not want to be seen as purely affirmative of the conditions they operate under, and that they would typically consider their contribution to be somehow of value to the world, whether this is in terms of ‘revealing’ an as yet unconsidered alternative, or rather offering an unforeseen space of quietude, or rather mirroring the cultural fabric we operate within. Any of these positions requires some form of thought and perception that goes beyond simple replication of the cultural conditions the architect operates within.

At the same time, there is a more specific sense of criticality that the ‘projective’ as put forward by Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting responds to. It is this response that is also embedded in the slew of various terms that position themselves as beyond, after, or in opposition to the critical in architecture. In particular, the conflation between the projective and the post-critical has hit a raw nerve. This has turned the debate towards an unproductive direction in which the protagonists argue semantics more than the issue at hand. They’re easily dismissed as too smooth, too easy, they’re either seen as too cynical or too naïve.

However, I believe there is a need for something like the projective. It addresses a specific problem with the notion of the critical that should be considered. In first instance, I will use the ‘critical’ as a general term to describe the incorporation of the neo-Marxist criticality: the general sense that the term projective was aimed at.<sup>1</sup> The problems with the critical can be taken as a number of general

---

1 This is the critical as used by Theodor Adorno, but the role of criticism became prominent with Manfredo Tafuri’s “L’Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criti-

ones within (at least) the transatlantic debate on architecture.<sup>2</sup> Within this general identification of problems, there are also specific cultural distinctions that should not be discounted, which will be briefly noted below. First, critical theory in general and its role in architecture has somehow deflected our attention from the architectural object by focusing (almost exclusively) on the underlying conditions that form the object, such as power structures, societal prejudice, and dominant discourse. In the end, this deflection of attention has become so strong that the architectural object is reduced to the illustration of the theoretical lens through which it is viewed. The problem with this approach was sensed as early as the mid-90s, when various ideas were introduced that attempted to transcend traditional categories, most incorporating some notion of a pragmatic approach such as ‘pragmatic idealism’. These new ‘sensibilities’ somehow responded to the idea that the critical theories employed in the architecture discourse were no longer sufficient to help us understand and work within the increasingly complex reality we resided in.

The criticism addressed to the pragmatic approach is typically directed at its acceptance of reality as it is. Again this does not do justice to the complex position taken up by architects. Have they, in the wake of a ‘post-critical’ era, become nothing but affirmative? Did they dive into reality and reject any form of criticality? This seems unlikely, because architects almost by definition must envision a ‘better world’. You cannot put a pen to paper unless you have some idea that what you are about to make is ‘better’, whether that means your building or urban plan is more appropriate, more subtle, more interesting, more engaging, more provocative or more delicately proportioned, than what you are about to erase or add to (transform). And it’s in this position that we can begin to make a distinction between the projective and the post-critical. The projective and the post-critical are typically dismissed because they are after or beyond the critical (therefore they are not critical). This seems a little unfair to the potential of the projective

---

cism of Language,” *Oppositions* 3 (1974). The edition in K. Michael Hays, ed.: *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, pp. 146–173) includes an introduction that notes that “criticism must violate and pass *through* the object of such an architecture *to the system that gives the object’s meaning*” (p. 146, my italics). This role of critical theory is the central one addressed by the notion of the ‘projective’, and it can be approached, as it is by Bruno Latour, as a general strategy of revealing undisclosed preconceptions throughout the twentieth century.

2 As the debate circling around specific reconsiderations of criticality and architecture has taken place primarily in transatlantic academic circles, I will remain within these boundaries. This is not to discount any contributions from elsewhere, but simply to focus on the center of the debate.

however: as a word, it was a clever choice. It incorporated the notion of the ‘project’ as fundamental to architectural production. It avoided the limitations of framing something as a ‘post’ development, therefore remaining also slightly off-center from the traditional discourse. The article by Somol and Whiting that launched this might have been imperfect as a well-researched scholarly position, but it offered nevertheless a number of provocative suggestions that held some appeal. They clearly sensed something in the air—something that is only now beginning to be framed in a coherent fashion, a group of ideas that seem to transcend a merely individual intervention.<sup>3</sup>

In essence, Somol and Whiting argued that there is something so specific about the architectural project, about making something, about envisioning something new, that we must endeavor to understand it as fundamental to what we do as architects. And if we understand it in this way, we might have a little opening (not a lot, but just enough) to move beyond what critical theory has enforced, which is to remain within an oppositional framework between creation and critique. We either critique the world (remove ourselves from it as agents) or we build a utopia. But there somehow was no room left in between these categories to maneuver within the very complicated world we have. Neither in theory nor in practice does this do justice to the many layers of problems architecture is required to address, nor does it acknowledge the fact that sometimes, a project may simply have to find the most satisfying solution to multiple wishes that are mutually exclusive.

The problems with critique as such, to the extent that they have been discussed in the architecture debate, are best addressed by Bruno Latour’s article from 2004, ‘Why has critique run out of steam?’<sup>4</sup> This article introduces this prob-

---

3 Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting: “Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism,” *Perspecta* 33 (2002), pp. 72–77. One could even argue (and indeed the authors themselves have remarked) that this was a relatively small article, meant to provoke a little, but certainly not meant as the sledgehammer it was taken for. In some sense, the importance of the article is not in the depth of its literal argument, but in the power of its reception and reiterations throughout a transatlantic debate. At the very least, we can take this to indicate that its provocations somehow hit a nerve, one that merits further exploration.

4 Bruno Latour: “Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, 2 (Winter 2004), pp. 225–48. See also the paper of Rixt Hoekstra elsewhere in these proceedings. She not only gives a good introduction on the Frankfurter Schule, but also noted that, contrary to Adorno’s expectations, the generation of 1968 enjoyed their pop music, got immersed, and became critical. This is at odds with the principles of critique according to the Frankfurter Schule, which presumes a strong division between artistic production and (derivative and therefore uncritical) mass production. Immersion is seen as excluding

lem of critical research about opinions and subjective filters, about understandings of the world, and not about facts. Latour has as a subtitle for his article: ‘from matters of fact to matters of concern.’ The crux of the article is encapsulated in a relatively simple diagram that shows the relation between the subject and the object. The critic places himself outside of this. There is a subject in this diagram (as we are all subjects), who believes that the object he values is somehow inherently valuable because of the qualities of the object itself. Now in the mechanisms of critique, the critic is the one who reveals the falseness of this view: he notes that the object is no more than a blank screen on which the subject projects his own interests and values. It is the attribution of values to this object that makes it valuable: this is the empowerment of the subject. At that point, when the subject begins to realize that this involves a sense of empowerment, of autonomy—of agency to create his own world, the critic again steps in and disabuses him of this idea. The critic tells him that he is not a free agent able to autonomously determine his actions, but is rather guided and determined by invisible forces and societal preconditions. The subject is now at the mercy of upbringing, social class, ethnicity and gender. These forces will determine your every move. This puts you in a double bind: you are neither powerful nor powerless. Or, to recall Rem Koolhaas’ characterization of architecture, you are both impotent and omnipotent.<sup>5</sup>

There is a rather remarkable situation here though: the critic has somehow remained outside of this scheme.<sup>6</sup> He has appropriated the god’s eye view (or the position of the evil scientist in Hilary Putnam’s *Brain-in-a-Vat*, or the Architect of the Matrix) and placed himself *jenseits*: beyond societal determination. The critic performing the critique is miraculously outside, while everyone else in the world is constrained within this diagram.

---

the critical impulse by definition, yet this seems to deny the duality with which one can be part of something and reflect on it at the same time.

5 “it [architecture] is a paradoxical mixture of power and powerlessness.” Alejandro Zaera: “Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas,” *El Croquis* 53 (1994): pp. 6–31. Curiously, his phrasing may distinguish (in a general sense) the critical theorists from the architects. A sense of alienation rings through in architecture’s being identified as *neither* powerful *nor* powerless, while there is an undertone of liberation in the mixture of *both* power *and* powerlessness. It seems as if Koolhaas’ position, in its diffusion, offers the possibility of accepting conditions we work within while preserving some individual agency. It simultaneously relieves us of changing the world in its entirety, and demands that we hold ourselves accountable for our actions.

6 According to Latour, this construction is made possible by allowing the two different steps (from all-powerful to omnipotent) to be based on two different subjects and objects. This aspect of the argument is not central to my argument, as it is primarily the position of the critic that is at question here.

This diagram is truly a remarkable feat. Even though it seems a little convoluted in its presentation, it very precisely indicates where the problem with critical theory arises: it begins from a position that is placed outside of its own logic. This, in the view of Latour, quickly then devolves from a useful mechanism into the conspiracy theories that can be used to defuse truly important (political) arguments.<sup>7</sup> Does Latour thus refute critique entirely? No, but what he says is that we have committed the greatest intellectual crime by using the tools of a previous era to address the problems of this one. Critical theory was crucial in the post-war era, in the 1950s and 1960s, to make us conscious of underlying conditions and preconceptions that were invisibly determining our actions. And yet, if we cannot presume, 30 years down the road, a minimal level of critical awareness, we cannot have this debate to begin with. So I would suggest that we begin with a presumption of some (fraction of) wisdom gained within those 30 years, of some awareness that apparently objective arguments are sometimes colored by their ideological agendas. If we can presume this minimal level of awareness (and suspicion of apparent objectivity), then maybe we can also acknowledge that we can simply try to formulate potential pitfalls, but need to primarily remain aware every step of the way. We can propose that we need to recalibrate our own ideas in response to the changes in the world around us. Then perhaps we can take a closer look at the presumptions we are operating within that keep us trapped in replicating the same mechanisms, despite the changes in our world.

### **Cultural misconceptions: different translations of critical**

As an illustration of the benefits of critical theory that we can perhaps consider incorporated in our discourse today, we can briefly examine some cultural distinctions in how ‘the critical’ as a general term is approached. This requires both an awareness of the debate as a general (transatlantic) issue, as well as the ability to see the specific cultural inflections that can inform us about underlying suppositions that color the debate.

The post-critical debate arose out of the U.S. This was mainly a response to the work of Eisenman and his interpretation of Tafuri’s ideas on autonomy in

---

7 Latour notes that this became truly apparent to him when, on the issue of global warming, a Republican politician used the tools of critical theory against the commonly held position of scientists that man-made pollutants were the cause. He suggests that the lack of scientific certainty, the fact that the evidence is not complete, should remain central in the media. Latour notes his concern that his own work in emphasizing the lack of scientific certainty (originally intended to emancipate the public) is now used to prevent action being undertaken against the urgent problem of global warming. Bruno Latour, see note 4.

architecture, which was premised on the inability to act in a culturally significant way upon society due to the already complicit nature of architectural practice.<sup>8</sup> In other words, architecture must recede somehow to be critical, and if it is implicated, it must thus by definition not be critical.

One of the specific traits of this American discourse, not only configured by the work of Eisenman but also strongly determined by the work of Michael Hays, is its focus on resistance to dominant ideas.<sup>9</sup> This cultural resistance is based on the idea that the autonomy of architecture is determined by its ability to disengage itself from the existing structures of power and capital. In the work of Eisenman this is largely expressed through his attention for the internal mechanisms on the discourse, and the near-linguistic modulations of his designs. Ironically, one could argue that this work thus reinforces the separation between architecture as a cultural act and the institutionalized theory that informs it. This precisely again replicates the sense of critique Latour argues is now failing to address contemporary conditions appropriately.

The book *Intersections* offers an introduction to this debate in England, which I would argue is more an ‘expanding’ of the historical object.<sup>10</sup> The discourse in England seems to have been marked by a stronger sense of a perceived objectivity of historical work, which never really incorporated a critical view of the underlying conditions that form the historical object as well. In this light it makes sense to *add* critical theory to expand the historical object with additional information. This takes on a specific form with the explicit desire voiced by the editors to bring together design and criticism. It is in the separation between design and criticism in the intellectual history of England that criticality is perceived to fulfill a role.

---

8 This is a reasonably well-documented position. Besides the paper by Jane Rendell elsewhere in these proceedings, the Somol and Whiting article explicitly takes a position in response to Eisenman’s notion of autonomy, as well as the critical architecture discussed by Michael Hays in his article “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form.” *Perspecta* 21 (1984): pp. 14–29. For a lineage of the positions on ‘criticality’ in architecture, see in particular: George Baird: “Criticality and its Discontents.” *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005). The problem with criticality and the way Tafuri is received particularly in American academic circles, see Rixt Hoekstra: “Tafuri: van tijdsgeest tot kwelgeest,” *de Architect* 2, Feb. 2007. pp. 16–19.

9 Hays, see note 8. In his introduction, he notes the idea of form as *resistant* and *oppositional* present in the idea of autonomous architecture.

10 Jane Rendell, Iain Borden, eds.: *Intersections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*. (London: Routledge, 2000). The introduction to the book by Iain Borden and Jane Rendell ‘From chamber to transformer: epistemological challenges and tendencies in the intersection of architectural histories and critical theories’ (pp. 3–24) specifically addresses the conditions in England surrounding historical and theoretical research.



This intellectual broadening in first instance appears unarguably interesting, as it claims a role for criticism as design, and the inverse sense of design as criticism. Nevertheless, as this work is framed from the perspective of a (by now traditional) sense of critique, it simultaneously seems to limit itself to a societal critique. The unexpected cultural significance that might arise from an object that is questionable in its original inception but becomes embedded in the cultural consciousness of its time is difficult to identify in this type of work.

In the Netherlands there was a strong sense of the potential of a critical stance to transform culture, as illustrated in the activities of groups such as the Provos. There was an exciting constellation of various urban revolutionaries (with, in retrospect, a charming form of lunacy) changing the face of our country. In the end, the shifts in the 1960s expanded to transform many elements of society: schools were reformed, universities were transformed in both curriculum and organization, and even language was addressed. Dutch spelling was changed, because it was considered too complex and therefore oppressive and authoritarian. Instead, the phonetic spelling became preferred as an indication of democratic equality. Therefore, the tendency in the Netherlands is primarily related to what can be considered the 'krities' appeal (spelled phonetically instead of the traditional 'kritisch').

The 'kritiese' Dutch groups were oriented primarily towards the social program and the political agency of architecture and urban planning. One of the most prominent features of this period is the rise in participatory planning, and the desire to give every (future) inhabitant a voice in the process of urban transformation. This deflected attention for the architectural object as such in favor of the underlying social and political processes. This implied that the architectural object must manifest no less, but also no more than just social program and political intent. Its additional formal, symbolic and cultural implications were essentially ignored.

I offer these distinctions not as a comprehensive history of the influence of criticality, but rather to indicate that in the global debate on notions of 'projective' and 'post-critical', specific modulations arise from the invisible presumptions that arise out of our own cultural history. It is the discourse of critical theory that has helped us understand how our cultural baggage informs the way we approach this issue to begin with. At the same time, there is an obvious question remaining somewhat hidden under the surface of these different interpretations of criticality. Why is architecture so enamored with critique? What has critical theory brought to architecture, and is it still useful as a strategy today? These are precisely the questions Latour raises in the more general role of critique, and his conclusion is that critique was central to a rethinking of many of our cultural preconceptions

at a specific moment in time. However, he also suggests that this is no longer the case. Is this true for architecture as well? Are we finished with critical theory's deconstruction of the intricate webs of power relations and how these enforced their own legitimacy by various means? Are we through with identifying the oppressive elements in dominant styles? Or is the core of the projective debate about a different form of understanding that builds on this history of critique? Could we perhaps treat the notion of the projective as a development that reveals the shortcomings of criticality rather than undermining it entirely?

### **Underlying mechanisms**

What the projective debate above all reveals is that certain mechanisms are still in operation that the discourse of criticality had hoped to undermine. First and foremost, the notion that critique is meant to reveal a false consciousness places the architectural project in a strange position: it is not an object in its own right, but an illustration of the mechanisms that shape it. In an inversion of the traditional all-powerful architect, this supposition removes the possibility of agency from the object. Unless, of course, the architecture is somehow critical: by having placed itself outside dominant culture, it becomes a powerful mode of revealing our undisclosed preconceptions.

This position on architecture continues to build on what Herbert Gans identified in the 1960s as 'physical determinism'. The modernist assumption that the use and reception of a building was more or less in line with their projections equates the physical gesture and the social response. The *machine à habiter* will not only appeal to the rational faculties of its inhabitant, it will induce them. Ostensibly, the notion of criticality undermines this simplistic rendering of cultural production by introducing many of the complex factors that shape it. By understanding such issues as budget, hierarchy, societal convention, gender bias, our understanding of an apparently clear project becomes more layered and comprehensive. These benefits must be acknowledged. At the same time, as criticality became more of a goal than an instrument, it shifted the focus from the richness (and internal conflicts) of the object to the underlying mechanisms. By giving primacy to underlying mechanisms, the surrounding conditions may have gained in clarity and presence, but the object itself began to disappear until it was no more than illustration of outside forces. This reinforces the notion of physical determinism insofar as it supports a singular reading: the critical building will induce critical consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

---

11 In the conclusion to his article, Hays himself suggests that the counterpoint to the simpli-

Above all, rather than accepting the idea that the spirit of criticality may also mean discarding the tools we have come to take as central to architecture, the critical has repositioned itself as a universal form of tactical resistance. It demonstrates the understanding we have of cultural output: that it must raise political awareness (or preferably, politically intervene), that architecture will preempt a revolution. Whether we look back at Le Corbusier's 'architecture où révolution' or Guy Debord's appeal to 'sous les pavés, la plage', there is a presumption that architecture has a significant (and to them perhaps even predictable) effect on society.

Criticality does presume that only *resistant* forms of cultural production are significant, for all other forms fall in the category of 'culture' described by Hays: the (mere) illustration of societal conditions. At the same time, one could also argue that some 'embedded' forms of architecture reveal other mechanisms that are culturally significant. A large generation gap becomes visible in this lineage of the American discourse on criticality: the mutually exclusive positioning of critical architecture as opposed to affirmative architecture seems to deny the very same multiple readings that the postmodern discourse of Eisenman, Hays, and many others explicitly acknowledges as a turning point in contemporary architecture. This is precisely the point that a contemporary reading of architectural practice may offer new insights: more fluid positions, availing themselves of 'small ideologies' that incorporate a strong belief system yet are not presumed to imply a totalizing position, and deeply embedded within the actual process of making, by their very nature both affirm and undermine our preconceptions.

In the end, this is where architecture has been short-changed by criticality. Latour's assertion that critique has taken us outside of the object by refusing to let us study the object itself, but only our projections onto or the underlying conditions that form it, illustrates the problem for architecture. At that point, what do you do with your building? It can never become more than a concrete manifestation of the conditions that you have hopelessly surrendered to. What also follows

---

fied treatment of architecture's qualities resides in a 'resistant authority', which neither simply reflects culture nor embraces a purely formal system. See note 8, p. 27. While Somol and Whiting respectfully reference his precision in revealing the necessary dialectic between autonomy and engagement, their arrows are aimed at the general project of critical architecture and its continuing presence in the architecture debate. "The criticality of Hays and Eisenman maintains the oppositional or dialectical framework in the work of their mentors and predecessors, while simultaneously trying to short-circuit or blur their terms." Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting: "Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33 (2002): p. 73.

from this is the notion that a work of architecture can never be properly understood until the social and political context is understood.

I think this forms the core question that gave rise to this debate on the projective. What can architecture do, and what is its scope of action? Can we hope only to reveal the conditions set upon architecture, or can we also intervene in ‘reality’? Do we have any form of ‘agency’ as architects? Or are we by definition determined by existing societal conditions and is it impossible to transcend the temporary significance of our own context? The presumptions of a critical architecture are also founded on the notion that if we somehow reveal this false consciousness (the intent of *Ideologiekritik*), people will automatically respond by behaving otherwise. It rests on the modernist idea of physical determinism: if we somehow create a revolutionary architecture, its occupants will transform accordingly: they will become revolutionary beings. In architecture, envisioning utopia includes not only a social but also a physical component: the ideal reality must be given tangible form. Our agency is somehow always projected at the physical realization of that utopian vision: if it is given a certain form, the social utopia will naturally follow.

The result of this position is a denial of the complexity of the relationship between our building and society. Can we not only envision, but literally build a new society? Can we socially engineer a society through critical architecture? If critical architecture is meant to reveal a false consciousness, then who holds the key to ‘reality’? Does that mean that the enlightened critic needs to tell people how to be critical, and more importantly to what end? This appears to be the weakness of this neo-Marxist, critical discourse. At some point, I am not only told to be critical, but also *how* to be critical. And at that point, does critique not defeat its own purpose? Aren’t the critics telling me that they have remained outside of the destructive influence of the system and I haven’t seen the light? Aren’t they telling me to take the red pill and exit the Matrix, to learn the truth about it? This externalized position of the critic continues to inform the debate today, and it seems difficult to envision a more embedded position that maintains some level of autonomy, that can envision an ideal while remaining implicated in reality.

### **Ways forward?**

This seems to be precisely the problem that Somol and Whiting intended to address: they suggest that there is some form of ‘agency’ in architecture that can elude the choice between physical determinism or impotence. The strength of their article is that they went back to architecture. They may have done this in a slightly diffuse way, calling in the Doppler effect, Robert Mitchum’s acting and

McLuhan's ideas on hot and cool media. Nevertheless, all of this was directed at and centered on the architectural object, and the idea that we might actually have a discipline that we can talk about. Not as some kind of mystical congealing of societal figures, but something that we can talk about as a discipline and as an expertise.

Now this is dangerous territory, because everyone with half a critical bone in their body will say: when you bring in the notion of expertise, do you not reintroduce the oppressive figure of authority that critical theory had taught us to question? Do you not deny the voice of everyone who does not share this level of expertise? Does the expert then determine our reality, taking away our freedom of speech, our freedom of thought? Yet it seems there is a simple way out of this dilemma, which resides precisely in a crucial aspect of architecture: making the building, be it in drawings, models, or concrete. The importance of making is the central theme in a recent book by Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (2008).

The notion of the 'craftsman' is typically associated with a pre-industrial sense of craft, and is therefore deemed inappropriate to what we might envision as the role of architecture in contemporary society. However, Sennett expands the notion of craft. He does not limit himself to making with the hands: he incorporates such 'crafts' as computer programming, parenting, and other forms of expertise not aligned with a traditional understanding of craft. Most importantly, Sennett argues against a more traditional opposition between intellectual production and craftsmanship, putting forward the idea that making is not unthinking, that it in fact *incorporates* thinking.<sup>12</sup> He includes a vast range of crafts and forms of expertise, because he is not looking specifically at a single form of craft or the object that results from it, but rather at what the mechanisms are by which these people create an expertise and through which they are able to speak about it in a more accurate or specific way. His notion of craft is based on an idea of expertise combined with (reflective) practice, requiring about ten thousand hours to lay claim to a level of 'craftsmanship' or 'expertise'. Sennett's description of craftsmanship also presumes a distinction in quality, which immediately raises the critical question of who determines the standards of quality? Are we going to relegate our hard-earned sense of social justice to a dusty corner of ideals and allow ourselves to be told that we simply cannot judge? Yet this also runs counter to what Sennett suggests: he also indicates that the layman can appreciate a well-

---

<sup>12</sup> This is not unrelated to the attention Michael Speaks gives to 'design intelligence': a form of thinking that arises out of the process of making. It is also akin to the work of Bruno Latour in 'Give me a gun and I'll make architecture move'.

executed work. More importantly, he suggests that there is a basic level at which all of us can learn to do something well: that talent is simply one aspect of the equation that leads to expertise.<sup>13</sup>

Sennett proposes that practice does make perfect, because it is the continuing practice that engages with specific problems, that allows for progress. Not only must one practice, but one must be willing to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them. To learn from mistakes requires a sense of reflection that is able not only to discern mistakes but also to conceive of how to correct them. The many hours of practice and reflection lead to a moment where the activity is no longer part of your conscious mode, but has become literally embodied: it resides in the fingers, in the voice, in the corporeal movements that make up the activity. Once it is embodied, the problems to be engaged can become more advanced, and the need for correcting mistakes progresses to the question of how to improve performance. One could also say, one needs to intimately know the rules in order to break them. In Sennett's example on music, it is when you have incorporated the expertise of hitting a note precisely and perfectly every time, you can begin to question the existing standards.<sup>14</sup>

This focus on the process of making reveals insights that may not become visible when only thinking through a problem. Architecture with its three dimensions and many contextual constraints may even be more susceptible to the need for making. It encompasses a specificity in conditions such as the site, light, space, context, regulations, client, and local traditions. At the same time, all these contextual constraints as well as the internal qualities of the discipline imply the inverse: once realized, the architectural object may not have the same effect as originally conceived, therefore it also needs to be reviewed and rethought. Moreover, once built, the architectural object becomes part of the everyday fabric, and as time passes it may be reinscribed with new ideas.

It seems that the idea of an incorporated expertise might allow us to redirect the debate on architecture and its 'critical' or 'projective' role, without having to take recourse to the positions on autonomy and criticality. On the one hand, architecture may be said to have a level of autonomy: the work of the architect is not entirely determined by his client, by societal conditions, or by existing standards. At the same time, it is obvious that its autonomy is limited: without a client there is no commission, thus no building, no presence, no 'agency'. It is dependent: you

---

13 Chapter 10, on quality.

14 Rendell suggests that it is crucial above all to question existing standards. I argue that we need to know them well, to be able to comply with them first, in order to question them.

are not going to build a World Trade Center if you cannot find your client. You are dependent on a client, on regulations, on context. And yet there is something the architect can do that the client cannot, which is to put that building together. The architect can ensure the infrastructure is solid, is well-organized, that the spaces fulfill their functional or symbolic requirements. The architect can ensure that the building as a whole is well-constructed, and that its spaces are 'good'. And this is what our discussion should revolve around: what are those good spaces? Are they related to what has gone on inside? Are they big, small, comfortable, expansive? Related to a style of the times, to its function, to a form of representation or rather a conceptual composition? These are more fruitful directions for debate now: let us take our insights from the past 40 years and bring them back to architecture itself. Let us understand the limitations of working for a corporate client, yet look at the building as a composite of many opposing influences, from architectural experience to cultural significance, from economic efficiency to urban regulations. How are these buildings designed? How do they respond to the surrounding public space?

My resistance to the by now traditional understanding of agency is that it is always reflected through a (class-oriented) sense of human and societal agency. We must always talk about the political lines, the people in the building, the program. There is at the same time, also an object to discuss, which often remains hidden: the building has a presence, which sometimes outlasts the time it was designed and constructed for. It might even be said to have an active role in the world: it is not only present, but used, looked at, experienced. It will demand engagement or intimidate its users, it will fade into its context or stand out. You can pretend to ignore its presence as an object, but that denies the complexity of cultural significance: each individual may receive it differently, yet there is also a general sense of symbolic value that is culturally biased. Rather than treat the building as a naturalized expression of social agency, why can we not talk about politics as being inscribed in the building? Why could we not presume that an architect will relate to his world, his culture, his society as an architect and not as a politician? This does not require us blinding ourselves to societal constraints and political conditions. This requires us to expand our view rather than compress it, but at the same time to keep it centered on what is most relevant to the questions at hand.

Most architects hold strong views on societal issues. Many architects enter into dialogue with their clients, questioning their wishes, probing the boundaries of the project brief. My experience of architectural practices is that they have a very strong sense of what they can contribute to the world. Yet their propositions

are often more humble than those of their predecessors. Raised on the incongruence between the promise of the spectacle and the reality of the silent majorities, they do not presume to design an ideal society with their buildings, but rather hope to offer something specific – a useful building, a playful building, a provocation or a quietly grounded space. This generation may respond to more or less universal or global conditions, but does not presume the universal applicability of their own work. Their improvements to the spaces of the city are oriented not towards a social utopia but towards a concrete and specific aim, which may nevertheless appeal to an ideal. This comprises a small step forward, in acknowledging that architecture is not all-powerful, but does have something to contribute, and that which it has to contribute is located precisely within the thing itself.

There is a role for critics in looking very carefully and rethinking the vocabulary we utilize to understand works of architecture. This requires an approach that encompasses a critical view perhaps, but more than anything a deep appreciation of the architectural project in all its finesses, from critique to exquisite solution for a specific problem, from cultural significance to the role of composition. For architects, there may well be something to be gained by making their considerations on standards of quality, their goals and the instruments used to attain them, explicit. Rather than speculating on brave new worlds, why should we not discuss very clearly the means and ends of each project? It also requires a certain humility of architecture: to acknowledge that in its bravoure of proposing as yet unimagined architectural propositions, that it is by nature also limited and constrained. However, these constraints could be taken as productive rather than limiting. It is a matter of standing within the discipline and identifying its potential, rather than holding it accountable from without.

In this sense, I would argue that Sennett offers an initial venture into a form of architecture production (ideas and realized) that might take into account not an ahistorical ‘essential’ view of objects, but that rather understands the complexity of contemporary conditions as *inscribed* in the object.