CRITICAL ARCHITECTURE

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Critical Practice

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Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till,
Dusk view (2000),
Stock Orchard
Street, Islington,
London. Photograph:
As a rule, architecture is considered a necessity, housing functional activities which, by their nature, produce wealth. It is also a means of securing capital through investment growth (in the form of real estate). Additionally in our post-industrial economy, architecture is increasingly being used to provide ‘symbolic’ capital for a company or individual (as in the trophy architect used to ‘brand’ a client’s business). In all these situations, architecture plays the role of handmaiden to the economy, and to institutional or personal interests. The association with money that attaches to architecture can be an opportunity, but also a curse, for in a service economy one is paid to furnish one’s clients’ desires, not to question them. A critical practice implies an act of criticism; and an act of criticism is designed to question the status quo, and to interrogate conditions that are contingent to a project. Art practice is, of course, based on an acceptance of this prior condition, but it is more difficult to practice critically in architecture, where the commercial relationship keeps the architect in service to their client’s interests. Most clients appoint architects that mirror their value system, and as a result, the opportunities for critical practice exist in relatively rare circumstances.

Practising architecture ‘critically’ implies working with the status quo, but at the same time exploring ways of critically adjusting the status quo in order to be able to make a critique. The ‘critical’ architect makes readings of existing situations and reveals their findings as a way of moving knowledge forward. The dilemma posed by attempting to practice critically is to balance the demands of the commercial imperatives (and clients’ wishes) that permit a practice to take place at all, with the possibilities of critique and change. The practitioner, and especially the critical practitioner, decides where s/he stands in relation to the issues that surround the production of architecture – its ethics, its knowledge, its people, and its economics – and takes upon a conscious position.

It is important to note that genuine criticality does not come about through a simple instrumental opposition to existing conditions; rather, it involves a disciplined training in a way of thinking that is entirely contingent and responsive to the opportunities presented by each project. A genuinely critical architecture has to develop ways of acting critically, and this in turn demands an engagement with its own production in a critical way. This requires judgement about situations the architect hasn’t met before. Every project offers its own unique set of challenges and demands, so the critical practitioner needs to respond flexibly; such an architect cannot approach the problems of practice using a set of rules or formulae to be applied (as in causal or instrumental approaches). A critical architecture depends on critical thinking, but thinking critically does not guarantee a critical outcome. Many other factors must come into play to ensure a critical practice.

Whether you join the system, act unilaterally on your own principles, or choose a collective resistance becomes the vital issue. One example is where the architect makes an architecture that sets out to question existing political and social structures (such as in Paolo Soleri’s Arcosanti, communes, travellers, squatters). Equally the architect can sometimes act unilaterally to question the values of their client (implying that they probably do it clandestinely). The tactic of being oppositional to a client’s wishes can cause confrontation, and is likely to result in ill-feeling and a poor working relationship. It is a brave architect that bears the burden of feeding them, so the critical practitioner must be far more devious and/or subversive if they are going to survive.

The more complex and the more public a project is, the more problematic it is for the architect to be critical. Public projects by definition aim to express shared cultural values, and these can become dysfunctional – even meaningless – because a critical approach may be openly misconstrued. For this reason, critical practice within the public realm tends to be limited to formal manipulation, an analytic version of true critical action because it engages so minimally with the political or social issues that lie at the heart of architecture. The critical practitioner will instead most commonly be found on the margins of mainstream practice, which is, by definition, a political position to adopt.

Superficially, critical architecture looks like ordinary architecture: you have to examine its production to discover where the critical position lies. Formal and technical critiques are almost always a smokescreen, because within architecture the issue of technology is regarded as politically neutral and form as progressive. Formal novelty as a response to a client’s desire for added cultural capital – a signature building by an ‘iconic’ architect for example – is not a critical practice. Equally, enquiries made possible by instrumental drivers and/or technologies (such as in new computing technologies or new materials, for example) come under the category of ‘innovative’ as opposed to critical. Accordingly, formal or technical novelty can rarely ever be categorised as questioning cultural conditions; rather, they are manifestations of the status quo. The avant-garde is simply the revelation of a historicist consciousness.

Far more interesting are the possibilities offered by programmatic or professional critiques, where, if given scope to interrogate a brief (with or without the full knowledge of the client), the critical architect can begin to play. Where an architect adopts an unconventional role, such as becoming a developer, being their own client, or developing a building product, then the possibilities of making a critique of existing working practices or products are opened up. In collaborating with other people to develop new working methods, the opportunity arises to use techniques of enquiry that are alien to – and possibly critical of – normative architectural processes. For example, it could imply a new analytical approach (philosophical, mathematical), or an innovative form of collaboration (interdisciplinary working) or the development of new forms of etiquette or association (such as cooperative working) to address a problem. Yet perhaps the greatest freedom to practise critically lies in the service of one’s own interests, since here the role of client and architect are almost certainly closely aligned. And this is what happened in designing, along with Jeremy Till a project, for our own use at Stock Orchard Street in Islington, north London.

In this design, for a house and an office on the same site, we seized the opportunity to critique the brief, especially the idea of the separation that exists between home and work, as well as other specifically architectural conventions.

In exploring the differences between home and office, we wanted to raise awareness of the received assumptions of what ‘home’ and ‘office’ mean, and did so
by adopting the surrealist strategy of juxtaposing unexpected combinations of elements. Accordingly the house element of the building adopts the spatial typology most often associated with offices, while conversely the office adopts characteristics usually associated with houses. The house occupies a volume that is 7m deep (the limit for natural cross-ventilation) and which is spatially undifferentiated, as in a typical open-plan office. Perimeter columns permit any organisational arrangement. This degree of openness allows the furniture in the living room to be rearranged in different configurations according to desire. Meanwhile, the office occupies spaces that are defined by a module of 5.6m – or 18.5 feet in old imperial measurement – this being the cross-wall dimension typical of London terraced housing for those of moderate income. Modest in depth (ranging from 4.5m to 6m), the office spans over the cross-walls below to suggest a sort of lateral conversion, and the scale of its two-storey composition is identical to the adjacent nineteenth-century terraced houses. The different functional elements of the building are organised at right angles to one another, so that from both parts one is always made aware of the presence of the other, a condition denied under capitalism but prevalent in everyday life. Capitalism requires the separation of life’s activities into categories in order to ensure the efficiency of production. Our project questions the location and expectations of work and acknowledges that home can be as productive as the workplace, while office life can be social, pleasurable, and emotional, just like home.

The dining table is a metaphor for the confusion of life and work. It is a place of domesticity (for family gatherings and special meals), as well as functioning as...
a conference room for the office during the weekday. Six metres tall and overlooked by two balconies, this space has formality and pomp; it is also the only room in both buildings directly to address the street, through a large window that acts as a proscenium and a frame. This emphasises the performative aspect of the space, reminding us that we are always playing roles, particularly in an office setting – but also perhaps when we are on our best behaviour during special occasions. And the dining table is a proper dining table, not a conference table. It comes apart in several sections and has specific dimensions that are to do with the intimacy surrounding conversation over food, rather than the dimensions often inscribed in the conference table where the distance across the table is a sign of power and professional neutrality. These subtle signs challenge our behaviour and remind us that we live in a hybrid world. The distance between domesticity and work is very small.

An important aspect of the critical enquiry contained in the Stock Orchard project was a questioning of the categorisations of what a home or what an office should look like. We were interested in exploring what is actually meant by phrases such as ‘high tech’ and ‘low tech’. Fascinated by why architectural culture in Britain loves minimalism, we sought out alternatives to these rigid categories. And we wished to encourage a domestication of the building process itself, since this is an area of expertise that wrongly allows ‘experts’ to claim knowledge and keep it out of reach of those wishing to participate more fully in the design-build axis, such as self-builders.

In line with the surrealist techniques mentioned earlier, we developed cladding systems for the walls of the house and the office wing that would confound expectations. We again swapped expected types, cladding the house in the industrial corrugated steel sheeting normally associated with factories and workshops, and clad the office in a quilted fabric reminiscent of domestic upholstery. The north walls of the house are made of straw because straw is simple to build with, has excellent insulation properties, and is very cheap. It is a beautiful colour too. Consistent with our plans to demystify the building process, we wanted to demonstrate how the straw walls were made – so we cut a large square hole in the corrugated steel and replaced it with transparent polycarbonate of the same profile. In this way the hairiness of the straw bale wall is exposed beneath the slickness and shininess of the polycarbonate. The effect of bringing together the slick and hairy reveals how architecture generally tries to conceal the hairy (rough, poorly built, messy) beneath a seductive surface, eliding the reality (chaos, mistakes) of building construction under the appearance of perfection.

The wattle hurdles that form the fence in front of the property have a tolerance of about 50 mm. The steel frame for the fence posts has a tolerance of about 1 mm. We brought these two together to signify our preference for the eclectic rather than the exclusive. Here we also wished to contrast the hand-crafted with the machine-made, although in reality both steel and wattle are largely handmade in their own ways. It is only the origin of the base material that differs (one is grown, the other is manufactured). Hurdles are domestic items, while steel is industrial. The cross-categorisation of technologies suggested by these two materials united in a single detail questions current orthodoxies concerning manufacturing techniques, aesthetic combinations, and iconography.
Since one of architecture's current concerns is the striving towards control of excess, we wanted the design for Stock Orchard Street to be something other than minimal; fat, in fact. Architecture that is fat and weebly. The solution arose because we needed to demolish a number of structures that were on the site to make way for the new building. Presented with a lot of material that would normally go into landfill sites, the original plan had been simply to tip it all into gabion cages and reuse it. Our structural engineer argued that the fill would have no structural integrity, so we were obliged to think again. How could we avoid contributing to further landfill? By swapping our fill for other fill. So we found a source of crushed concrete recycled from previous buildings and filled the gabions with this instead. It proved cheaper to buy recycled concrete than to take away the demolished material. That is exactly how it should be.

Sandbags were another response to the aesthetics of clean, sharp arsines and perfect masonry coursing in contemporary architecture, and of factory-produced materials whose performance can always be predicted. The sandbags provide mass to the office wall that faces the railway and its rhythm of passing high-speed trains. Seeking a way of providing a heavy façade that did not rely on brick or blockwork (high in embodied energy), this seemed a simple solution that could be home-made.

In conclusion, this is a project in which critiques are made on a range of issues: the separation between aspects of our lives as dictated by social, economic, and cultural forces beyond our individual control; architecture's own concerns (esthetic categorisations, architectural identity, fashion, expertise, knowledge, and techniques who or what determines how we build; and ecology and responsibility. Our expectations of how familiar and everyday places should feel, look, and service us is revealed as something that is simultaneously robust and long-lasting, but also capable of reinvention. Typical photographs of new buildings illustrating a frozen moment are powerful evocations of the myth of architecture's power to renew. Yet in reality all buildings weather and decay, and cities constantly change. Being ubiquitous and obvious, these are conditions we often take for granted. In the sandbags that integrate existing buildings into new ones, in the sandbags that decay and crumble, in the juxtaposition of farm and industrial products, in the diverse aesthetics and simple constructive techniques, Stock Orchard Street reveals and embraces the processes that determine our expectations and the metamorphosis at work in the city, and asks us to reassess old ways of making sense of them.