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**'Critical Architecture' conference special issue of  
*The Journal of Architecture***

**Introductory essay for the 'Cultural Context' stream  
...REVISION 2, FOLLOWING EDITOR'S COMMENTS AND  
THEN REDUCED IN LENGTH...**

**Murray Fraser  
April 2005**

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**The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture**

In shaping the conference themes, we were aware of two underlying requirements for critical architecture: the desire to be openly critical of the society in which it finds itself, and the need to criticise its own methods of practice and production. How then might architecture ensure that it is genuinely critical, and that this will not only be about negation, of saying 'no', but also allow positive, constructive possibilities? Before looking at this dilemma in relation to this strand of the conference, it is worth reiterating how the issue surfaced in recent architectural debate.

There can of course be said to be a pre-history of critical architecture, but it was the Marxist challenges that Manfredo Tafuri issued to architects in the late-1960s and early-1970s that have shaped contemporary views on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Tafuri asked some fundamental questions. Under what conditions is it possible to practice architecture? And more specifically, given the Faustian bargain made with capitalist development in the first stages of modernism, was architecture now doomed to sublime uselessness? Reactions to Tafuri's position came notably over his reading of the Marxist concept of ideology, dissected in an essay by Fredric Jameson, or in setting out a framework for critical architecture, which Michael Hays did in an article in *Perspecta* in 1984.<sup>2</sup> However, the most stimulating responses to Tafuri's position came from those in the up-and coming generation who were determined to practice as architects, and so needed to find ways around the theoretical impasse that Tafuri had presented. The exemplars were Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi, who responded positively to the challenge, seeing it not as the 'death of architecture' but as a provocation for a method of design that might be hybrid and subversive.

Their interest came from a broader Marxist notion of cultural production then gathering pace, stimulated largely by the 'critical theory' of the renowned Frankfurt School. This trend was particularly strong on the Continent, especially in centres such as Paris where critical theory was blended from the

1970s with post-structuralism and psychoanalysis in the work of figures like Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze. Koolhaas and Tschumi were aware of these theoretical developments, and yet chose in that period to live in London and study at the Architectural Association; Tschumi continued to teach there for some time after. Their location is noteworthy, for elsewhere in Britain at that time was happening a significant transformation of critical theory into an academic approach now commonly known as cultural studies. This took aspects of Marxist theory from Continental Europe and mixed them with a parallel tradition of empirical cultural analysis by writers such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. The principal focus was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the University of Birmingham from the 1960s onwards, inspired above all by Stuart Hall, who took over as director in 1968.<sup>3</sup> Two key propositions might be said to define the otherwise diverse and complex spectrum of cultural studies. The first is that it involves the study across many academic disciplines into the social and cultural formations found in advanced capitalist societies, with the precise task of identifying inequalities in wealth, power, status and opportunity between different groups. Hall has noted that the work of cultural studies is 'to mobilise everything that it can find in terms of intellectual resources in order to understand what keeps making the lives we live, and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihuman in their capacity to live with difference'. The second proposition, derived explicitly from the Gramscian stream of Marxist thought - which held that every aspect of daily cultural life has to be battled over in opposition to hegemonic forces - is that it is the task of intellectuals to suggest the means to mitigate such inequalities.

Although they were engaged on their own distinct agendas, what Koolhaas and Tschumi might be said to have been doing - albeit unwittingly - was to apply the cultural studies approach to architecture. What they seemed to spot was the weakness in Tafuri's argument, which, for all its brilliant insights, was predicated on a limited (possibly a Renaissance scholar's) idea of what architecture was, and on a crude opposition to a suspiciously singular and monolithic enemy named capitalism. The first step of Koolhaas and Tschumi's alternative strategy was therefore to scrutinise the USA as the heartland of modern capitalism, with the purpose of deconstructing the supposed rationality of cities like New York or Los Angeles.<sup>4</sup> The second stage of the strategy - one that it can be argued that Tschumi never quite fully progressed onto, but which Koolhaas most certainly has - was to use architectural projects to probe and exploit the fissures in the latest and ever more globalised version of capitalism. A hint that these were their tactics was revealed in a symposium held in Montreal in 1994 by the Any Corporation, a think-tank run by Peter Eisenman and Cynthia Davidson, published the following year under the title of *Anyplace*. During a round-table discussion, Bernard Tschumi, then head of the architecture school at Columbia University in New York, declared:

Architects act as mediators between authoritarian power, or capitalist power, and some sort of humanistic aspiration. The economic and political powers that make our cities and our architecture are enormous. We cannot block them but we can use another tactic, which

I call the tactic of judo, that is, to use the forces of one's opponent in order to defeat it and transform it into something else ... To what extent can we move away from a descriptive critical mode to a progressive, transformative mode for architecture?<sup>5</sup>

Yet there was clearly some uncertainty amongst those present at the symposium as to how criticism might be turned into a positive by 'engaged' critical architecture. Fredric Jameson for one noted:

I want to suggest that the political relationship of works of art to the societies they reside in can be determined according to the difference between replication (reproduction of the logic of that society) and opposition (the attempt to establish the elements of a Utopian space radically different from the one in which we reside) ... How then could a building establish itself as critical and put its context in negative or critical perspective? The perplexity of our political reflections on architecture finds itself concentrated in this question: since architecture becomes being itself, how can the *negative find any place in it?*<sup>6</sup>

Jameson was alluding to the condition that for it to be built within a given social and political context, architecture has to ally its utopian or anticipatory aspects to the prevailing value system, and thus become complicit, to some degree, in the spatialisation of dominant values. Simply claiming to be critical cannot get round this problem. Never the one to agree with any consensus if he can help it, Rem Koolhaas also showed that he was now out of kilter with the prevailing views of what he felt had, in East Coast academic institutions, descended into talking-shops for unfeasible ideas about political opposition. During the same Montreal discussion, Koolhaas reached the end of his tether, laying down his own neo-Tafurian challenge:

One of the underlying aspects of this conversation, which for me is an inheritance of the climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, is the basic assumption that regardless of our respective positions, the only respectable position is a critical position. That distorts the whole discussion because no matter how critical we are about society or our profession, it is impossible to make a creative statement that is based purely on criticism. There has to be a component of adhesion or reinforcement or complete identification. I find it ambiguous, if not hypocritical, that we all pretend to discuss something that we want to maintain a certain neat and moralistic distance from. In fact, some of our most interesting engagements are uncritical, empathetic, and very risky.

My problem with this reigning discourse of architecture and architectural criticism is its inability to recognise that in the deepest motivation of architecture there is something that cannot be critical. In other words, to deal with the sometimes insane difficulty of an architectural project, to deal with the incredible accumulation of economic, cultural, political, and logistical issues, requires an engagement for which we use a conventional word – *complicity* – but

for which I am honest enough to substitute the word *engagement* or *adhesion*.<sup>7</sup>

In part this acknowledgment came because his practice, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture, was in serious financial difficulties during the mid-1990s - it nearly went bankrupt - making Koolhaas appreciate a more complex relationship of radical theorising to that of a market-led economic system. Reshaping his strategy to make it more aware of social realities has, in his view, given his practice a different critical edge since then: '... one of the important evolutions is that we no longer feel compulsively the need to argue, or to justify things on a kind of rational level. We are much more willing to admit that certain things are completely instinctive and others are really intellectual.'<sup>8</sup>

It was also as a result of this more engaged idea of architectural practice, a situation in which theory is downplayed and subsumed into design projects, that Koolhaas has used Asian and African cities, or notions like the spatial logic of shopping, as weapons to bash Western architectural values and modes of practice.<sup>9</sup> Chinese architects might thus be eulogised for being significantly more efficient and less intellectually precious than their Western counterparts; in the same time as a London or Manhattan minimalist takes to get the flash gap on a loft interior 'just right', a Chinese architect has designed a new skyscraper, etc. Thus what Koolhaas now appears to be saying is that instead of architectural theory being treated as a tool that stands outside and offers a critique of a given cultural context, it itself is in fact entirely produced by and subsumed into cultural practices. So this is why the study of differences between cultural contexts becomes the primary intellectual task. As writers such as Homi Bhabha have argued so eloquently, cultural identity offers the location for identifying what might be considered as critical practice, not the other way around.<sup>10</sup> Playing on these issues becomes the way forward in an age of increasing globalisation. Hence the tactics for Koolhaas in recent projects are those of spatial transgression within different cultural contexts, as in the public right of way that is to snake through the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, or embedded spatial redundancy, as in the wastage of retail volume in the Prada store on Rodeo Drive, Los Angeles. Koolhaas calls for greater self-awareness and realism, and a certain muddiness in architectural thinking, not for the abandonment of a critical stance.

However, the problem is that many theorists in the USA seem to have misunderstood the Koolhaas line in the *Anyplace* book, and for these figures it was but a short skip and jump to a position of total complicity, accompanied by the rejection of any hope of a critical architectural position, through what has been designated the 'post-critical' approach. Its key text is by Somol and Whiting, which fetishised design and complexity theory as the means by which to dissolve criticality into building production.<sup>11</sup> The shortcomings of the 'post-critical' approach are dissected elsewhere in this volume, so here it is worth just noting another charge against it, which is that it is an excuse for latter-day American intellectual isolationism. In this sense, the 'post-critical' stance is an attempt to avoid adopting a political position in architecture,

becoming a strategy of withdrawal that fails to understand that it is the engagement with cultural difference that provides the possibility for criticality.

So the need is to reject the 'post-critical' position and reassert a sense of the differentiation and complexity of potential critical positions across the world. What is on offer to architects is a melange brought about precisely because of the processes of globalisation. Here is where the cultural studies approach allows the possibility of different readings and different tactics in different situations, whether in terms of their social, economic and political conditions, or because of the relative effectiveness of forms of critical architecture within those circumstances. Cultural theory, being largely critical in intent, means that existing conceptions of social practices such as architecture need to be replaced by more inclusive readings that address issues like race, gender, and the unequal distribution of resources. This of course opens up a Pandora's box of connected issues including spatialised power relations, gender politics, queer space, and the like. The crucial thing, however, is to see these architectural and spatial issues in relation to their specific cultural context, operating simultaneously on global and local levels. Might it be, for example, that the concept of critical architecture is a relative luxury in Western and developed regions of the world, and is actually more needed in less economically advanced countries? Can the idea of criticality be seen to vary between urban, suburban and rural conditions, and is there particular building types or conditions of practice that are more inherently resistant to critical reinterpretation than others?

These issues, and many more, surfaced in the papers presented within this strand of the Critical Architecture conference, with contributors from countries such as Israel, China, Australia, Norway, Spain and Britain. The nuances and complexities were multifarious, and what came across was the need for a close empirical reading of each situation, and for architects and academics to take an explicit moral stance on the issues involved, rather than pretending to escape into intellectual or professional neutrality. For this purposes of this volume, two representative papers are selected. In the first, Charles Rice asks how an architectural critic might respond to projects such as Federation Square in Melbourne, which are predicated on the notion of reforming subjective experience within the city, given that so much in the architectural canon, and its structures of interpretation, is based on the notion of building as (more-or-less) autonomous objects, and given the Tafurian challenge that capitalism has rent asunder the possibility of any creative or positive subjective engagement within the public realm. Rice uses the 'post-critical' debate to conclude that critical activity on this basis is effectively futile, and notes that any reading that the critic might wish to impose on Federation Square becomes swallowed immediately in the presence of the work. It offers a salutary and perhaps sceptical approach to the notion of critical architecture. Taking a different tack, Sarah Wigglesworth from London argues that while it is not possible as a practicing architect to pursue a critical agenda at all times, significant opportunities do exist. What she does in her paper is to go through a number of the projects that she has designed (along with colleagues in Sarah Wigglesworth Architects), analysing the motives behind and the conditions within which they were pursued, in order to judge whether they

allowed positive transformations to emerge through a critical approach. Her hope is that her most impactful projects, such as for the town of Castleford or the addition to Mossbrook School, are indeed able to challenge the status quo and suggest better possibilities for social and cultural life.

The two papers reprinted here cannot of course pretend to be comprehensive in terms of showing what critical architecture might be, yet this is precisely the point. A critical position in architecture remains essential, but needs to be made more cunning in its evaluation of and response to cultural context. Edward Said has written of our common experiences in light of colonialism and globalisation since the nineteenth century: 'Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved with one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.'<sup>12</sup> It becomes the task of critical architecture to engage with and enjoy this level of differentiation and hybridity.

### **Footnotes**

1. M. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, Cambridge, Mass & London: MIT Press, 1976: A possible pre-history of critical architecture might be traced back to Constant Nieuwenhuys in the Situationist International in the 1950s, or Augustus Welby Pugin in the nineteenth-century Gothic Revival, or Claude Nicholas Ledoux in post-revolutionary France, or even the monastic ideologues of the Cistercian Order, or further still.
2. F. Jameson, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology', *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986 (Vol.2)*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988, pp.35-60: K.M. Hays, 'Critical Architecture', *Perspecta*, Vol.21, 1984, pp.15-28
3. The best introduction is K.H. Chen & S. Morley (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1996: See also, S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996: S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997
4. R. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, New York: Monacelli Press, 1978/94: B. Tschumi, 'Sanctuaries', *Architectural Design*, vol.9, 1973, pp.575-577: B. Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, Mass & London: MIT Press, 1994
5. B. Tschumi, comment made during a discussion forum, in C.C. Davison (ed), *Anyplace*, New York: Anyone Corporation / Cambridge, Mass & London: MIT Press, 1995, p.229
6. F. Jameson, 'Is Space Political?', *ibid.*, p.196
7. R. Koolhaas, comment made during a discussion forum, *ibid.*, p.234

8. [http://www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/013/rem\\_text.htm](http://www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/013/rem_text.htm), reprint of M. Fairs, 'Rem Koolhaas', *Icon*, no.13, June 2004 (Icon website, access date 24 March 2005)
9. R. Koolhaas et al, *The Great Leap Forward: Harvard Design School Project on the City (Vol.1)*, Koln: Taschen, 2001: R. Koolhaas, 'Junkspace', *The Harvard Guide to Shopping: Harvard Design School Project on the City (Vol.2)*, Koln: Taschen, 2001, pp.: R. Koolhaas/OMA/AMO, *Content*, Koln: Taschen, 2004
10. H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp.1-2
11. R. Somol & S. Whiting, 'Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism', *Perspecta*, Vol.33, 2002, pp. 75-77: G. Baird, "'Criticality" and its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, No.21, Fall-Winter 2004, pp.16-21
12. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, p.xxix