Is Criticism Critical?


The past few years has seen a lot of academic bickering around the question of a “critical” architecture. Though it is difficult to suss definitive positions in the context of a general decrease in architectural publication concurrent to the explosion of words in the blogosphere, this paper proposes to sketch a horizon of the recent debate in North America in an attempt to locate the purpose and meaning of such criticism.

Arguably, the clearest statement regarding the nature of a critical architecture was proposed by K. Michael Hays. In an article from the late 1980s, Hays distinguished between a cultural and formal reading of architecture. For Hays, the work of Mies van der Rohe exemplified a critical project that is not only culturally or formally bound, but rather may be both. Dependant upon the writings of Manfredo Tafuri, Hays’ position is clearly one that operates from outside the discipline of architecture. As if in opposition to Hays’ extra-disciplinary approach, another group of writers look to the autonomy of the discipline to propose innovative responses. Critical theory, they argue, is no longer a viable model for architecture and should be abandoned. Michael Speaks, perhaps the loudest advocate for a “post-vanguard” architecture, calls for a new design intelligence that embraces all that Hays intended to oppose. In various essays, Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting have proposed that architecture might be more projective than critical. Sylvia Lavin has argued for a performative architecture in which the form relates to affect of sensation rather than reference.

While each position may be viable within certain ideological positions, one may still ask what are they being critical of? In what ways do such positions help to form criteria by which to make value judgments? How do such positions guide the making of architecture that is both significant to the discipline of architecture and relevant to the world we share? I conclude the essay with a critique of criticism both from outside (Tafuri via Hays) and from within the discipline of architecture (Speaks, etc.) and propose rather that a combination of both are not only viable but also essential.

Marc J Neveu, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Architecture
College of Architecture and Environmental Design
California State Polytechnic University
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407-0282