

Of villas and pavilions

Interdisciplinarity and critical practice

'All memory has to be reimagined: The Villa and Architectural Imagination'

Reading Patrick Lynch's article 'All memory has to be reimagined: The Villa and Architectural Imagination' I was reminded of the 'The Intimate Metropolis' symposium at the Architectural Association in November 2003, when the paper was delivered in its original form. The event in itself was intense, of the kind that the then chairman Mohsen Mostafavi would support as part of his own cultural agenda, albeit one that had an ambivalent relationship to the dominant studio teaching activities in the school.

Lynch's inclusion in the symposium was as a 'thinking practitioner'. In my mind there is little doubt that he is one of those few architects who, now in their mid-thirties, are capable of articulating a cerebral dimension to their own practice of architecture. Other people who come to mind include William Mann, Tom Emmerson and Alun Jones. But the list is not long and in this country the ability to attend to abstract concepts and translate these into well worked out building projects is not something that one could consider as normative. The fact that all these people studied at Cambridge at some point or other is perhaps significant, with this school's insistence on an intellectual substrate to design.

The paper is at its best when searching for a definition of the villa as a type, and placing it within a historical context. The difficulty I have (and it is one I remember having when I heard it delivered in its original form) is the relationship that Lynch is attempting to make between a historical precedent and the

implied connection with three projects produced by his own office, as further examples of this type. I hope I am not making a merely semantic point in insisting on this, but I do believe that what we call something in terms of building type is important, because it assists in our understanding of its very character. In this instance, I do not believe these three projects by Lynch are examples of 'villas'. The

Smithsons' seminal project at Upper Lawn (that one suspects has had a not unhelpful influence on the Casa Vaseur project by Lynch) is referred to as a pavilion and sometimes as a folly. Both of these terms suggest a very particular place the building as object has in the landscape, and this is quite different to that of a villa – contemplative dimensions aside. I cite the Smithsons' project because



villa or pavillion?

I believe it is more understandable in its connection to Lynch's projects. I also happen to think that these have many wonderful qualities and hope that it will be possible one day to celebrate them as built projects.

I do believe there is a difficulty in citing one's own work in writing and it is slightly easier to refer to a significant episode rather than attempting to describe a whole project. That Lynch is willing and capable of citing historical models for recent architecture should in my opinion be applauded. It is really a question of how these can meaningfully be translated into contemporary culture.

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Giving up the frontier

I have been delighted by the various responses made in the pages of *arq* to my article 'Architectural Research and Disciplinarity' (2004, v. 8, n. 4, pp. 141–7) as well as to the conference, 'Critical Architecture' held in November 2004 at The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London which I co-organised with Jonathan Hill of the Bartlett, and AHRA, the Architectural Humanities Research Association, represented by Murray Fraser of the University of Westminster and Mark Dorrian of the University of Edinburgh. The dynamic and discordant commentary these two 'events' have produced is evidence to me that the issues raised are relevant and require further development. I would therefore like to clarify my own position in relation to the points raised.

Firstly, concerning inter- and multidisciplinary, I defined these terms in my article and suggested that they could be used to describe architectural research. I would like to refute the position put forward by Peter Carl that: 'The term "interdisciplinary" comes from trying to find respect in research-driven universities' and at the same time respond to Felipe Hernández's provocation that 'interdisciplinary research ... is the reserve of wealthier schools of architecture in larger urban centres'. I suggest that architecture as a subject includes history, theory, criticism and design as well as urban,

technological, social and professional studies. It is a subject that contains architectural design as a specific discipline, but also which embraces knowledge, understanding and modes of operation particular to a number of other disciplines ranging from the sciences through to the arts and humanities. Defined this way architecture can be described as a multidisciplinary subject. However, it is also possible for those various disciplinary approaches brought together within architecture to offer critiques of one another; I would describe the moments, projects and practices where this occurs as interdisciplinary. It is also the case that researchers from architecture can work with those from other subjects to form multidisciplinary research teams; if this research aims to critique the modes of operation of the disciplines involved, then I would describe it as interdisciplinary as well. So architecture is a multidisciplinary subject, which sometimes operates in an interdisciplinary way.

In my view an interdisciplinary approach can be distinguished from a multidisciplinary one in terms of its critical intention. Interdisciplinary research calls into question the ideological apparatus that structures the terms and methods of a specific disciplinary practice. The aim is to critique, resist and question existing and dominant processes and to produce new forms and modes of knowledge and understanding. The theoretical writings of Julia Kristeva and Homi Bhabha make this point perfectly clear: 'Interdisciplinarity is a term that has been used in critical theory long before its adoption and redefinition as part of research assessment and funding council terminology. Since the practice of interdisciplinary activity is a political necessity not a material luxury, it does not make sense, as I see it, to argue that it is the prerogative of 'wealthier' institutions as Hernández suggests – his position aligns interdisciplinary research with affluence, whereas I suggest that interdisciplinarity emerges through the desire to produce a political critique. Given the recent appropriation of the term in much of the literature concerning research in academe and higher education where the word is now used in place of multidisciplinary, it seems to me that the need for interdisciplinary research, as I have defined it here, becomes even more

vital. It does not reflect a desire to work to funding council 'norms' as Carl posits, rather it is the very kind of activity that intellectual and creative life requires to critique and question such 'norms'.

Secondly, I would like to clarify my own position concerning the relationship between criticism, critique and critical practice, with respect to some responses made following Brian Hatton's review of 'Critical Architecture' (*arq*, 2004, v. 8, n. 4, pp. 105–8) and David Leatherbarrow's wonderfully rich discussion of conviction and critique. In 1999, in their introduction to *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Michael Newman and Jon Bird stated that: 'An essential part of the project of Conceptual art was to demolish the distinctions between art practice, theory and criticism.'² This seems to me a provocative suggestion. If we assume their definition of the project of conceptual art to be correct, then two questions are relevant here: first, whether this project has succeeded, and second, whether there is an equivalent project in architecture.

Taking up the first question, I would argue that since practice, theory and criticism are still recognised and identifiable as different, although they are increasingly cross-referencing one another, this would seem to suggest that the project has not succeeded, at least not quite yet. While certain kinds of art practice informed by conceptualism have taken on cultural roles more common to theory (which we might define as operating to produce a general perspective than a particular view – trying to make sense of a number of specifics taken together) and criticism (which we might define as aiming to respond and critique a cultural work), and increasingly some theorists have discussed their work as a form of writing practice, such a tendency has been less marked in criticism. Perhaps it is because some critics wish to retain the rather powerful role assigned to them as art's judges and at the same time institutions associated with art require critics to fulfil such a role in order to maintain art's economic and cultural value. There are, however, a number of critics, myself included, who are increasingly arguing that criticism is a form of practice.³ I will return shortly to discuss how this argument operates and why it is important.

Now, in response to the second question: is there an equivalent project in architecture concerning

the demolition of the distinctions between practice, theory and criticism? If Hatton's response to 'Critical Architecture' is to be taken seriously, which I believe it should, then it would seem that attempts to instigate such a 'demolition', as was the intention of the conference, in my own view, have for Hatton produced intellectual confusion. Hatton demands that theory, criticism and design be distinguished 'in order to enable their engagement'. Through the conference we explored distinction and engagement in two ways. Each organiser distinguished their theme by explicitly setting out their definition of the terms employed, while the various papers and projects presented engagements of practice and criticism which put each theme to work in the form of various possibilities. Yet the problem here, for Hatton, is that each of the four conference themes aimed to articulate, each one differently, the current condition, which the four editors recognized as *already* constituting the engaged status of criticism and practice – that is criticism and practice had engaged before they had been distinguished. The task of 'Critical Architecture' then is the reverse of what Hatton suggests, having already engaged, we need now to distinguish one form of engagement from another. Such a condition is not unusual, precisely because the path of original intellectual and creative work is often not systematic, concepts, ideas and works may be generated first and analysed later in order to produce categories of distinction. But my guess is that Hatton has in mind a particular kind of prior distinction, one which drives a firm line between criticism and practice, ensuring that each one performs a particular role, a distinction which once established disallows engagement.

Hatton asked too for definitions of the terms critical and criticism, I will attempt to make some order from what Hatton perceived as chaos, and clarify what such terms mean for me. If, as I set out in my paper, following Raymond Geuss (following Marx) critical theory can be defined in terms of self-reflectivity and the desire to change the world,⁴ I would like to extend this definition here and employ it to distinguish critical practice from practice. The term critical would point then both to self critique but also to social critique.

Criticism can be defined by its purpose, which is to provide a

commentary (a judgement, a discriminating point of view, a response or even a point of departure) on a cultural work – art, literature, film and architecture – and to put into play a discussion of what a work can do. But is criticism a practice, and when we use the word practice are we referring to critical and/or creative practice? A definition of creative practice might suggest that it exists solely for itself, since criticism always has an 'other' in mind, this might be a reason to suggest that it is not a creative practice. But architectural design too is a form of creative practice that is a response to another's need, usually defined through a brief, so this distinction – that there is an 'other' involved – should not prevent criticism being considered a creative practice. Much criticism is not self-reflective and does not take into account its own modes of operation, much less provide a form of social critique, and so does not merit being described as a form of critical practice in the sense outlined above.

To date, criticism has operated through the medium of writing, but there is no reason why it cannot take new forms – those of art, film or even architecture. Each of these media has an architectonics – a series of procedures for material and spatial organisation, structure and construction. In writing we might think of the patterning of words on a page or the design of a page itself – its edges, boundaries, thresholds, surfaces, and the relation of one page to another – as the distribution of objects in space. So it is possible to consider criticism as a form of architectural design, in so doing, in thinking one in terms of another, a strategy we might describe as deconstruction, we are able to see more clearly what the differences between the two might be, and what is at stake in binary and often hierarchical definitions.

It is also possible to think of things the other way around and to consider design as a form of criticism. Architects make clear in a myriad of ways that design is a mode of enquiry that is capable of producing new knowledge of the world through creative processes, but also that one design can offer a critical commentary on another, and may also question its own mode of production (self critique) as well as social and cultural conditions (social critique). Such an approach is nowhere more evident than in Sarah Wigglesworth Architects 'Straw Bale House', for

example, which questions the rules governing ecological design through its own architectural details and, in relation to other ecological designs, has set up controversial debates with respect to its combination and use of materials.

Leatherbarrow provided a fascinating account of critique but seemed to use the term interchangeably with criticism, except at one moment where he argued for critique as a subset of criticism – that critiques of the work and the world are types of criticism. I prefer to use the terms another way around, to argue that criticism is a form of critique, that the term criticism refers to those projects, which aim at providing critiques of works rather than critiques of the world.

My position regarding the use of the three terms – critical, criticism and critique – can be summarised in this way then: when criticism takes on the task of self and social critique, as well as the critique of cultural artefacts, then it can be described as a form of critical practice, when practice takes on the project of providing self and social critique it can be described as critical practice, and when critical practice also involves the critique of other cultural works it can be described as criticism.

In discussing the relationship between literature and literary criticism, Jacques Derrida argues:

These new distinctions [between literature and literary criticism] ought to give up on the purity and linearity of frontiers. They should have a form that is both rigorous and capable of taking account of the essential possibility of contamination between all these oppositions ...⁵

I agree with Derrida's position, and find this a useful place to draw my comments to a close. I suggest that we give up the frontier and cease from drawing lines to separate architecture and criticism, that we look instead to sites of contamination, such as 'Critical Architecture'; perhaps these might also be thought of as sites of interdisciplinarity – for they call into question what we thought we knew and demand from us new critical and creative work.

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- 1 See and Julia Kristeva, 'Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: an interview', Alex Coles and Alexia Defert, eds, *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-*, v.2, (London, 1997), pp. 3–21 and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London, 1994).
- 2 Michael Newman and John Bird (eds) *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) p. 2.
- 3 See for example, Gavin Butt (ed.) *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)
- 4 Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, (Cambridge, 1981), p. 2.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, (London: Routledge 1992), p. 52.

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