

## Ramia Mazé Critical of What?

»Today, we see a number of examples and growing tendencies along these lines in several disciplines. In product design, interaction design, graphic design—we see many different kinds of designers who are trying to use their practice, their processes, methods, materials, products and modes of production to say something other than what has been prescribed by prevailing terms.«

This is a transcription of Ramia Mazé's lecture at the *Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice* Seminar in Stockholm, December 6, 2008.

As the last of the all the speakers, I wanted to raise some questions and to make some connections among the things we've seen and heard today. I think it's only appropriate to end these discussions around »critical practice«—and also the various kinds of activities we have engaged in today—with questions. Critical practice is less concerned with problem-solving than with problem-finding (to borrow a phrase from Superstudio, one of the 1960s anti-design groups that we just heard about in Sara Kristoffersson's presentation)—with exposing issues and articulating questions. Further, we hope that this event is only the start of future discussions about critical practice—within design and in Sweden—this is a work-in-progress. In this spirit I am going to end with a series of questions, as an attempt to frame some aspects that might be interesting to explore further.

My name is Ramia Mazé—my training and practice is in architecture and in interaction (or interactive) design, and therefore I come to graphic design from the outside. I have been struggling—but from the point of view of architecture and interaction design—with ideas of critical practice and critical design for some time now. In part, this has been about locating my own position as I have moved from architecture, which has a very deep and long running discussion around criticality and criticism, into a new discipline, interaction design, which doesn't yet have the substantial or established intellectual foundations that could be a basis for taking a stance towards ethical and political issues, towards issues of ideology.

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Sara Kristoffersson, design critic and senior lecturer in design history at Konstfack, University College of Arts Crafts and Design, Stockholm. Her Ph.D. examines the Italian design group Memphis and the Anti-Design/Radical Architecture Movement through groups such as Archizoom and Superstudio.

There are two questions that I have been thinking about today—the first is, »What do we mean by critical?« and, the second, »Critical of what?«

### What do we mean by »critical«?

In architecture, the term came to the fore in the 1970s. This marked the end of what was called the »era of manifestos«—the Modern period in architecture, which was characterised by a few great (mostly male) architects and a great many manifestos. In the 70s, there was widespread reconsideration of some of the failures of modernism—for example, the environmental costs and the social consequences of mass housing projects and (sub)urban developments. The demolition of the Pruitt Igoe housing project (which is also a theme in Åbäke's work in this exhibition) was a symbolic event that marked the dismantling of the modernist icons. It was no longer enough to erect a manifesto, it was necessary to build accountability.

This also meant reconsidering some of the »ahistorical« claims of modernism, and there was a discussion about how to account for the architect's place in history and role in shaping futures, and about professional respon-

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Pruitt-Igoe, large urban housing project completed in 1955 in St. Louis, US (designed by architect Minoru Yamasaki, who also designed the World Trade Center towers). Shortly after its completion, living conditions began to decay; by the late 1960s, the extreme poverty, crime, and segregation brought the complex a great deal of infamy as it was covered extensively by the international press. At 3 PM on March 16, 1972 the first of the complex's 33 buildings was demolished by the federal government. The Pruitt-Igoe housing project was one of the first demolitions of modernist architecture and its destruction was claimed by postmodern architectural historian Charles Jencks to mark »the day Modern architecture died«.

sibility. In architecture schools, the attempt to be more rigorous about architecture's role and responsibility was expressed in the (sometimes very rigid) distinctions between the theory of architecture, the history of architecture and the practice of architecture. These were the lines along which architectural education was divided (and typically still is). In this scheme, it was historians or philosophers who took charge of architectural criticism, whereas practitioners did the pragmatic work of building things that were structurally and environmentally sound, often based on ideas and standards set out by others outside of local or everyday practice.

Critical and post-critical movements in architecture, however, have been challenging these rigid distinctions. Thinking practitioners and practicing theoreticians explore alternative relations between theory and practice. And the 1970s also gives us examples of this—for example, in Italy, anti-designers tried to develop political or critical positions from within practice. Jorge Silvetti (who is today part of the establishment at the Harvard School of Design) was part of this radical reconsideration in the 70s, and he argued for »criticism from within«. This is the idea that practitioners—within their own practice, with their own tools, methods, materials and forms—could mount a critique. That they had the power, the intellectual and ideological ability, to push back against predominant or prevailing ideologies. This might be a critique of the principles, mechanisms and effects of capitalism (for example, Superstudio's work) or socialism (the work of the British

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Superstudio, architecture firm, founded in 1966 in Florence, Italy by Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia. Superstudio was one of major part of the Radical architecture movement of the late 1960s.

group Archigram). Arising and practiced locally and personally, such critiques also vary country by country and among disciplines.

Led by designers, this is a whole genre of practice concerned with the place and role of design, a movement away from the idea that criticisms or critical positions of design could only be made from the outside—by design historians or theorists—but could actually be mounted from within practice and by practitioners. Designers have a voice, they had an agency, and their practice could be a platform for speaking about theoretical concepts and for acting in ideological terms.

Today, we see a number of examples and growing tendencies along these lines in several disciplines. In product design, interaction design, graphic design—we see many different kinds of designers who are trying to use their practice, their processes, methods, materials, products and modes of production to say something other than what has been prescribed by prevailing terms. Throughout the day today, we have been discussing design that is not (or not only) in service to the ideas prescribed by clients and commissioners. Designers are pushing back, developing their own ideas and developing propositions on this basis. The tendency towards critical practice seems to be growing and deepening, and spreading into more design disciplines. But then, especially, we might ask—what are we critical of?

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Archigram, avant-garde architectural group formed in the 1960s and based at the Architectural Association, London. It was futurist, anti-heroic and pro-consumerist, drawing inspiration from technology in order to create a new reality that was solely expressed through hypothetical projects. The main members of the group were Peter Cook, Warren Chalk, Ron Herron, Dennis Crompton, Michael Webb and David Greene.

### Critical of What?

What are critical architects critical of? This is a question asked by Reinhold Martin, who teaches and practices architecture. As more and more people are talking about and doing critical design, it is a very relevant question in order to deepen our understanding of what it is that we critique. I want to suggest three ways that we can think about answering this and to make some connections to the things we heard today as illustrations.

One way that we could think about criticality in design would be in relation to the individual practitioner and their practice—that it is part of their own effort to become more self-aware or reflexive about what they do and why they do it. This might be understood as a sort of internal questioning or positioning yourself within your practice. The reflective or critical practitioner might be thinking about what their unique concerns are, what they have to say, what their methods are, what their particular sort of knowledge or contribution might be within a particular situation. By reflecting on what they do and how they do it, and how that's different from what and how other people do things, they try to build the particular identity of, or idea behind, their practice.

Often this kind of reflection involves contextualising—or re-contextualising—your work. We heard from Julia Born how she engaged with another mode of cultural production. She discovered many things about her own practice by operating outside, in a dance and performance context. She began to work with a notational idea, the extension of a process over time, and to work with—through

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Reinhold Martin, Associate Professor of Architecture and Director of Buell Center for Study of American Architecture, Columbia University, US.

her relation to a live audience within a performance context—aspects that were very different from her graphic design practice. Collaboration or relocation of one's own practice can become a sort of activity of trying out or testing out the boundaries around your practice, by pushing it up against another. And, in the process, perhaps you learn about something that you had previously taken for granted but suddenly had to articulate or experience in another way. Comparing and contrasting practices, or even disciplines, can help to sharpen how we understand or express our own position. On a meta-level or disciplinary scale, or on the designer-in-their-world local scale, this could be considered reflective or critical practice.

Secondly, we might think about the role of critical practice in building a meta-level or disciplinary discourse. This kind of »criticism from within« means that we are somehow trying to engage in ideological or intellectual questions, but from within design and as design. These are exactly the kinds of questions that make up the foundations of a discipline—the questions that locate the particular and unique concerns of a discipline. At least in part, building a discipline is about specifying the knowledge, skills, capabilities, ideas and interests, in relation to that of other disciplines. And it's no accident that the discussion of critical practice comes up now—while architecture is an old discipline, the relatively newer disciplines of industrial design, product design, interactive design and graphic design are becoming integrated into academic curriculums in a more formal way. A more formal recognition of a discipline or practice can mean that there is a more substantial and common ground for articulating your offer, for competing against others—even for charging higher fees.

This tendency towards discipline-building can also

be seen as a reaction to the fact that there's an increasing number of people that might do design or think of themselves as designers. As we heard in the discussion around Nille Svensson's presentation just now, new technologies and open-source ideas mean that almost anyone can make a webpage or a poster. Can graphic design be done by anyone, is it becoming a sort of vernacular language that anyone can speak? And one response, at least, can be to raise questions about what graphic designers can do that others cannot, to try and specify the particular knowledge that makes it a discipline or a profession, or the unique identity of an individual practice.

While the discussion about critical practice is relevant to a sort of disciplinary project, to building the foundations of a discipline, it also seems that we are working, or even must work, in an interdisciplinary way. There are many crossovers in the examples presented and exhibited here in which graphic design is borrowing from architecture, performance, sound and robotics. Even putting design into a (art) gallery means that we're not just talking about design—we are intentionally occupying another context in order to make another kind of discussion, to expose design to another set of ideas, perceptions and critiques.

There is a sort of tension here—are we concerned with building a discipline? Or deconstructing a discipline? In architecture, which is an old and established set of ideas and structures, there is a strong centre of gravity, a relatively clear idea about what architecture is about, even a rather evident hierarchy in terms of who the main figures are. This centre of gravity was something fairly distinct that the radical fringe of critical architecture and anti-design could challenge and push against. Jorge Silvetti says that critical practice, operating from the edges, has an impor-



tant role to move the centre, to advance or update the discourse or the discipline. Critical practice functions as a catalyst to change the mainstream or the status quo—and at least one way that can be done is by borrowing from other disciplines.

I might suggest one last way that we could think about critical practice or criticality within design—that it is a basis for mounting a critique, not just of our own practice, of our discipline, or even of design in general, but for mounting a critique of other, pressing issues in society. As active and engaged people, we are not only turned inwards towards ourselves, our peers, or collaborators, we may also be trying to engage with issues outside of design. Perhaps we want to engage with environmental or social issues—»Save the Whales«, as discussed in the last presentation. In other words, we can use the tools and the platforms of design to mount a critique of something that happens outside of design. This is evident, for example, in the work of Metahaven. Their Sealand project is about nation building and national identity—ready-made graphic elements assembled through the web programme directly mirror the mechanisms that make up the nation itself. In this way, it can be seen as a critique of or alternative to more traditional ways of national branding and patriotic identity.

Criticality has an important role to play within design on many levels. Specifying this can help us understand why it is important and what it is we can do. To recap—criticality within our own personal practice can be seen in how we reflect upon our methods in order to locate our voice and articulate our position; criticality within a community of practice or discipline can be about trying to challenge or change traditions or paradigms; and criticality can also be targeted towards other issues and ideas out-

side design altogether. What is common to all is that critical practice is about using what we know, what we have, our skills, our work, to raise, explore and make public a critique. It is about acknowledging that designers have power – and that the powerful visual and material means of design can be used to build a unique form of critique.

### **Some conclusions**

I just want to say that I'm very pleased to have been here today—I discussed with Zak Kyes on the coffee break the importance of having an exhibition like this, as an occasion or stage to talk about critical design. Of course, it's difficult to appreciate all the dimensions of the work—it is definitely more than two-dimensional! Does it need to take place in a book, can it be contained within an exhibition? There is a depth to this discourse around and within critical practice that is not easy to capture in an exhibition. There is also a need for visualising the ideas making up the discourse and a need for examples of work like this, which are difficult to present in a long text or are at least not as accessible in that form. This exhibition plus book plus event—it is itself a very interesting form of critical practice, which we can step into and inhabit. It's a fantastic and ambitious project, and I hope that we all here in Sweden will continue this kind of questioning and inquiry and discourse.

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**Practise, Europa, Experimental Jetset,  
Nille Svensson (Sweden Graphics), Åbäke,  
HC Ericsson, Will Holder, Samuel Nyholm,  
Metahaven, Dexter Sinister, Emily Pethick,  
Mark Owens, Nick Currie, Ramia Mazé**

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