

I Mean to be Critical, But...

Kim Dovey

When someone begins a statement: 'I don't mean to be critical but...', then we are forewarned that they do mean to be critical, and they will. In the practice of architecture the reverse is often the case. Architecture that is meant to be critical becomes incorporated into, and complicit with, a prevailing economic, political and social order: the 'ever-the-same' returns in the guise of the 'critical'. In this chapter I will suggest that critical architectural practices can be seen to operate along two semi-separate dimensions: the 'formal' construction of meaning and the 'spatial' mediation of everyday life. The conceptual oppositions buried here (form/function, representation/action) and the separations between them, are clues to understanding the ways a supposedly 'critical' architecture is neutralized. The illusion of a critical architecture becomes compatible with a specialization in the production of both symbolic and social capital. I don't mean to be critical but I want to suggest that a critical architecture may be one that unsettles the architectural field; and one of the tasks of architectural critique may be to expose what might be called a 'critical complicity'.

The ways in which a dominant order appropriates, assimilates, neutralizes and marginalizes its critics have been well explored by social and architectural theorists operating within a critical theory framework, particularly that of Benjamin, Adorno, Jameson and Tafuri.ⁱ The 'critical architecture' project was originally conceived and pursued in the US by critics and architects such as Hays and Eisenman; the 1984 paper by Hays entitled 'Critical Architecture' has been seen as seminal and a brief critique of it will serve as an introduction to the issues I want to raise. Hays defined critical architecture as 'resistant to the self-confirming, conciliatory operations of a dominant culture...'.ⁱⁱ He sketched two extreme positions—the compliant reproduction of dominant values on the one hand and formalist autonomy on the other—and identified 'critical' architectural practice with a zone of operations between these poles. In practice, however, this formulation of a 'critical architecture' focused on formal critique to the exclusion of social practice; it embodied the promise that an architecture of formal autonomy could resist the dominant order through its very own order of

materials, surfaces and forms. 'Critical architecture' was thus confined to the formalist end of the formal/social spectrum and social engagement in architectural practice was conflated with complicity.

This particular trajectory of 'criticality' seems to have largely run its course and many of the products of deconstruction can now be seen as little more than stylistic effects that reframe and reproduce the very social relations they were conceived to resist. Yet the question of a 'critical architecture' remains perhaps the most crucial of the time and has been given a recent twist by the well-publicized attack on it by Speaks.ⁱⁱⁱ This critique of 'criticality', entitled 'After Theory', can be read as both a call to abandon critical social theory entirely because it stifles innovation and a plea to integrate architectural thinking with architectural practice. I will return to this debate later in this essay; but in order to make sense of it I want to add a critic from outside this critical theory lineage: Bourdieu's work on discursive 'fields' of cultural production shows how aesthetic practices camouflage practices of power, how images are appropriated as symbolic capital, and how aesthetic production reproduces social distinction.^{iv} While there are some parallels between Tafuri and Bourdieu (particularly on the economic role of the avant-garde), Bourdieu's work is ignored by most within the 'critical architecture' project. I suggest this is because it unsettles the social 'field' of architectural practice rather than the formal debates within it.

I take a critical architecture practice to mean one that engages broadly with the ways in which architecture is enmeshed in practices of power. It does not necessarily mean an architecture steeped in critical social theory nor one that makes critical statements. Indeed, as my title suggests, the intention to criticise may be the first step to complicity. A definition of a critical architectural practice also depends on how the field of architecture is defined. Are all buildings 'architecture' or (as Pevsner would have it) just those produced by an elite? And is the practice of 'architecture' limited to the imagination and construction of buildings?

At risk of oversimplifying I think it useful to conceive of the social critique of architecture operating along two closely related yet distinguishable dimensions of representations and spatial practices.^v The

first of these has primarily to do with the ways in which built form constructs social meaning as a form of discourse or text. Largely stemming from the discursive/deconstructive turn in social theory, the key focus here is on the manner in which identities and subjects are produced and reproduced through architecture. Within this framework a critical architecture often transgresses the codes through which gendered, ethnic, class and other identities are produced and reproduced. A critical architecture may seek to unsettle or disorient its subjects, to transgress the grounded comfort zone of fixed identities and meanings while engaging with new identity formations. A critical architect will be critical of the thoughtless reproduction of identities and will accept the responsibility of the inevitable production of identities—nations, cities, corporations, communities, families and selves—through architecture. The question is not whether architecture constructs identities and stabilizes meanings, but how and in whose interests.

The second dimension involves the ways in which architecture frames spatial practices, actions and events through its spatial programs. A critical architecture in this regard may pay attention to the structure of social space, the use of boundaries to mediate social encounter, and to standardized spatial fields and building types.^{vi} Questions of identity and subjectivity are approached through a focus on everyday life as mediated by spatial permeability and segregation, by transparency and opacity, and by the desire lines and rhythms of spatial practice. Foucault's insight into the importance of the spatially structured social gaze in the production of normalized subjects is crucial here; but no more so than those of Lefebvre, de Certeau and Deleuze into the role of transgressive spatial practices in reshaping the social world.^{vii} A critical architecture in this regard will engage creatively with architectural programs and will resist the mindless reproduction of socio-spatial practices. It will also resist the idea that because power is invested in programmed boundary control that liberation is somehow found in open plans or fractured geometries. Architecture always mediates spatial practices in a semi-coercive manner, it enables and constrains; the question is not whether but how it does so and in whose interests.

These two dimensions of architecture—as text and program—are always connected in constructed buildings which simultaneously construct meanings and mediate spatial flows. Architecture is a multiple 'framing' wherein representations are framed by spatial structures that are in turn infused with narrative interpretations. The structured pathways into and through a building mediate and frame architecture as discourse, and meaning in turn is partly produced by the mode of encounter. Represented meanings and spatial practices produce and reproduce each other through architecture. While representations and spatial practices are integrated in the field of everyday life, in the field of architectural critique they tend to be divided. It is this separation of architecture as text from everyday life that has facilitated the appropriation and neutralization of 'critical' architecture.

The imperative to integrate meaning and use comes in part from the degree to which meanings are constructed in use—a view with roots in both Heidegger and Wittgenstein. In *Being and Time* Heidegger distinguishes between our active engagement with the world (*zuhandenheit*) and our contemplation of it (*vorhandenheit*).^{viii} While the meanings of works of fine art are based in contemplation, those of architecture have their primacy in everyday life where contemplation is but one part. The discursively constructed meanings of architecture can neither be reduced to its use nor separated from it. The 'language' of architecture is not added to the spatial program but is written through it.

For Wittgenstein, language is a 'game' with meanings of words constructed through the uses to which they are put; to paraphrase him: 'let the use of (buildings) teach you their meaning'.^{ix} Again, this does not suggest that meaning can be reduced to function, but rather that some primary meanings of architecture stem from what and who it is 'for'. A critical architecture will not separate meaning from action; it may be useful to ask the Deleuzian question—not what architecture 'means' but what it 'does' and how it 'works'.^x What are the effects of particular semantic and spatial framings, what flows of desire are produced? Such effects may have little to do with the architect's conscious intentions since the social encounter with architecture is both oblique and contingent; its 'taken for granted' framing of our collective lives is a key to its potency. Architecture is a social art that, as Benjamin puts

it, "is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction".^{xi} Architecture is steeped in habit, it is a production of habitat and of the *habitus* which is defined by Bourdieu as a set of structures, dispositions and rules frame everyday life and the 'sense of one's place' within it.^{xii} Bourdieu's work is useful to this issue in part because he links the *habitus* to the discursive *field*; the socially structured practices of everyday life to the production of symbolic capital within institutionally structured fields of power.

I want to step sideways now to illustrate this a little and to look at architecture as a field of power. Peter Eisenman's early buildings, for their time, seemed to many to be paradigmatic of a 'critical' architectural practice. Many of the reassuring certainties of dwelling, tectonics, function and identity were relentlessly transgressed as he inspired a generation of younger architects with the hope for an architecture that could resist and deconstruct a dominant order. In a recent interview, he is quoted as follows:

"...most of my clients are Republicans... and I have the most rapport with right-leaning political views, because first of all, liberal views have never built anything of any value, because they can't get their act together."^{xiii}

Leaving aside the political sentiment, this identification of architectural value with the currently dominant global order gives cause for thought about how a 'critical architecture' has been conceived. Is this the old story of the critical 'young turk' turning conservative as he reaps the benefits of success, following the oldest of imperatives in getting the job? Or is it more of a desperate attempt to regain the limelight by reframing the field of cultural production? From the viewpoint of Bourdieu's social theory, Eisenman's persona, his architecture and his career have been largely produced by the 'fields' of architectural discourse and practice; he has played this field successfully and in a manner that has never threatened broader processes of social reproduction. This is not a new argument, it was most clearly, if rather simply, put by Ghirardo in 1994 when she argued that Eisenman's work creates an illusion of a critical architecture, sustained by staying one step ahead of the audience's capacity to

critique it.^{xiv} His work is a sophisticated application of critical social theory, particularly Adorno and Derrida, yet the alignment of such work with the political party of global imperialism is cause for concern—an alignment made possible by the split between text and program outlined above. The illusion of a 'critical' architecture is constructed by a reduction of 'architecture' to text protected from criticism by an inaccessible private language. Consider another quote from the same interview:

"I believe that art and life are two different discourses, and how I want to live is different from how I want to practice architecture. I love living in an old New England house; my in-laws have a small sea-side house in Connecticut. I had this 1740s farmhouse... where I used to live. What I do not want to do is to recreate a 1740s farmhouse; I want the original thing, with the original boards, because you can't get those kinds of wide boards any more, the kind of nails that were made."^{xv}

Here we find the distinction between representations and practices set out clearly; life is reduced to a discourse and separated from architecture as autonomous art. And there is another distinction here that Bourdieu would understand, the social capital available to those with the right in-laws and access to seaside houses—the symbolic capital and 'aura' of the rare and authentic original. The anti-essentialism of deconstructivism folds into a new essentialism.

Eisenman has become an easy target but this issue is not about individuals, it is about fields of power. Daniel Libeskind's 'freedom tower' on the World Trade Center site illustrates this in a different way. With credentials established by the Jewish Museum in Berlin, this is a commission which Libeskind is well-qualified to carry out in a critical manner. Instead we find him wearing the stars and stripes, affirming the simplistic reduction of 9/11 as an assault on 'freedom' and democracy.^{xvi} Perhaps this repetition of the party line is the price to be paid by the architects of the new world order, but it can scarcely be called 'critical'. There is a sense that architecture is permitted to be critical at certain moments and in certain places where that criticality helps to both heal social division and legitimate the social order. Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin and Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in

Washington each stand as seminal contributions to a critical architecture of this kind. But they do so by affirming history as a question rather than reducing it to a dominant cipher.

For many critics (and I am among them) Rem Koolhaas' work comes closer to a critical architectural practice in that it engages critically along both formal and programmatic dimensions. Much of his programmatic innovation can be construed as an attempt to resist the formularised reproduction of everyday life and to generate more random social encounter in the interiors of buildings. In my critiques of some of this work I have suggested that he achieves this with mixed results—the formal magic of architecture produces an illusion of everyday emancipation.^{xvii} Ironically, many of his achievements come from the degree to which he recognizes the limits to autonomy and criticality. Instead of encoding critical comment or opposing the effects of power, his work at times accentuates such effects rendering architecture more socially transparent. One could go on deconstructing the deconstructionists, however, my point is not to target individuals who are often producing good work in a formal sense. It is rather to suggest that all this work exists, and all these agents operate, within a field that is structured in a manner that enables a seemingly 'critical' architectural practice to thrive while at the same time reproducing the very social structures, identities and practices that it purports to challenge.

It is interesting in the case of the 9/11 project to consider the proposal by Sorkin which was to turn the site of destruction into a memorial and open space while distributing the required floorspace across a series of sites in Lower Manhattan where urban regeneration would be of more social and economic value.^{xviii} This idea, where void rather than solid signifies memory and social value is married to economic value, was never seriously considered because it directly contradicted the ideological agenda in both symbolic and programmatic terms. The debate was framed around the merits of the various forms proposed for replacing massive volumes of office space. Once framed in this manner the field is ripe for critique about which forms are more 'critical'. In his critique of the prospects for a critical architecture Baird comments that:

"...despite widespread admiration for his critical writings, the substantive theoretical form of Sorkin's "resistance" is not seen to be centrally embedded in his own design production, as Mies's has been seen to be by Tafuri, or Eisenman's has been seen to be by Hays."^{xix}

While Sorkin's work is formally engaging it is not easily reduced to formalist critique and does not fit the prevailing definition of the field of 'critical architecture'. The appropriation by the corporate market of the autonomous form-making of both Mies and Eisenman is not accidental; autonomous formalism is a required condition for the production and renewal of symbolic capital in that field.

This narrow definition of the field is the 'straw-man' deployed by Speaks in his much-discussed polemic entitled 'After Theory' where he largely conflates theory with critical theory, and declares it finished: "I would argue that theory is not just irrelevant but was and continues to be an impediment to the development of a culture of innovation in architecture... unremitting critique chasing its own tail, without purpose or end".^{xx} This notion of the end of 'theory' is mere polemic since what replaces it in this account is a different theory about the opportunities for formal innovation opened up by new technologies and information systems. Yet it does ring true that the trajectory of criticality based on Tafuri's pessimism and Adorno's negative dialectics has largely exhausted its formalist possibilities. Baird has interpreted this turn to what he terms the 'post-critical' in terms of the need for a generation of Eisenman's protégés to move out from under his shadow. Yet from the broader viewpoint of the field of cultural production I would suggest that this is a significant move in clearing the field of architecture (both theory and practice) for new symbolic capital; it is a correction in a 'meaning market' which has become saturated by images of criticality. The deeper problem with Speaks' critique of criticality is that it suggests an abandonment of critical social theory while largely preserving the 'field' of critique—a recipe, as Benjamin might put it, for 'more of the same' returning as the 'ever-new'.^{xxi}

These current debates in some ways echo those from long ago between Adorno and Benjamin on aesthetic and social theory.^{xxii} For Adorno the only hope for art was a retreat into a critical,

autonomous and esoteric formalism—an art that resists appropriation by politics, markets and dominant classes. Benjamin, in contrast, saw liberating possibilities for collective aesthetic practices, modes of production and reception. For Adorno criticality is embodied in, and protected by, the 'difficulty' of the work; Benjamin seeks a broader audience and is keen to dispense with the aura of the individual genius. A good deal of what has passed for 'critical architecture' in the Eisenman/Hays trajectory can be seen in the Adorno tradition which Eagleton describes as 'offering up the sickness as cure'.^{xxiii} There is a certain subversive potential or shock value in such an approach and the deconstructive movement in architecture has exploited and largely exhausted it. The limits of such an approach lie in its autonomous formalism. The framing of everyday life and the representation of identities within it are reduced to text; critical architecture is reduced to architectural criticism. In their pursuit of 'criticality' such buildings can become signifiers of the idea nothing can be done beyond the production of architecture as criticism. Beyond the stifling of formal innovation, the deeper problem lies in the stifling of programmatic innovation and therefore of social engagement.

In his account of the trajectory of the 'critical architecture' project, Baird points out that 'the museum has continued to be a more receptive venue for critical work than the street'.^{xxiv} This stems from the division between art and everyday life that I traced earlier—the critical is contained and neutralized by the gallery. This is not to suggest that unbuilt architecture has no potency; the unbuilt, however, commonly slips into the unbuildable. In order to be classed as 'architecture' there must be some vision for the future of the built environment at stake. This condition is necessary for a debate about critical architecture to begin—a critical architecture must at least plant seeds of desire for a better future. It follows that the image on the screen, the gallery wall or in the magazine is but a means to architecture and not its end; the end is the future which is at stake. One of the ways in which we 'mean to be critical, but...' is that architecture becomes separated from its consequences; the image becomes an end rather than a means. One can critique the image, its antecedents, style, facility and critical social content but there can be no debate about aesthetic, social or environmental futures if there is no future represented.

Architecture is rendered safe for critical attention by reducing social content to representation and

by the severing of architectural discourse from any possible future. When the image becomes the end rather than the means it may become a fabulous piece of 'criticism' but it loses critical potency as 'architecture'.

The issue here is not whether the project has a real site, client community and budget, nor whether it is necessarily buildable, sustainable or affordable. The first question is whether it is understandable as a possible future that could be inhabited; and the second is whether it catches the imagination and nourishes the desire for change. This is not to suggest the eradication of forms of aesthetic production that do not represent possible futures. Developments in computer-aided graphics are unleashing a flood of seductive imagery and there is no need to clip these wings of spatial imagination. The question is: to what degree does such work come to be seen as 'critical architectural practice' and does this substitution become a form of complicity? The architectural imagination, at its best, produces the desire for a better future; it contains the potency of the possible. The potency of architecture, its politics and its power, lies in keeping the future of the built environment always at stake. In a well-known interview Foucault was quoted as follows:

"Liberty is a practice... it can never be inherent in the structure of things to guarantee freedom. The guarantee of freedom is freedom... (architecture) can and does produce positive effects when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom."^{xv}

This suggests that a critical architecture will engage with a third dimension beyond the representations and spatial practices outlined earlier—an engagement with practices of collective action and constructions of collective identity.

The field of architecture has been largely constructed around the identification of architecture as formal innovation—an artistic practice constructed in opposition to all that is 'common'. It is also the framing of everyday life and the invention of a future; and in this regard good architecture is all too

uncommon. A critical architecture cannot be practiced in opposition to ideas of 'community' — however problematic that concept may be—because that is where collective action takes place and where collective identities and desired futures are negotiated and constructed. A critical architecture is an unsettling practice, and it may be unsettling for both the architect and the various communities of interest. A critical architecture will destabilize the field of architecture, its boundaries, identity formations and reproductive practices. A partial autonomy of architecture is useful for critical purposes but must remain the subject of critique. The retreat to autonomous practice can entail a conflation and confusion of the freedom of the architect with the broader project of social emancipation. To what degree does the quest for a 'critical architecture' construct a space of 'critical complicity' where innovation can be safely contained; a space where we mean to be critical, but...?

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- ⁱ Seminal texts include: Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1976; Fredrik Jameson, 'Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146, 1984, pp.53-92; Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, London: New Left Books, 1974; Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Yovanovich, 1978; Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1999.
- ⁱⁱ C. Michael Hays, 'Critical Architecture', *Perspecta*, 21, 1984, pp.15-28.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Speaks, 'After Theory', *Architectural Record*, June 2005, pp.72-75; See also: George Baird, "'Criticality" and its Discontents', *Harvard Design Magazine*, 21, 2004, pp.16-21.
- ^{iv} Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, London: Routledge, 1984; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, New York: Columbia U.P., 1993. For architectural interpretations see: Garry Stevens, *The Favoured Circle*, Cambridge, Ma.: MIT

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- Press, 1998; Kim Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture', in: Jean Hillier & Emma Rooksby (eds) *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, 2nd Ed. London: Ashgate, 2005, pp.283-96; Katerina Rüedi, 'Curriculum Vitae: The Architect's Cultural Capital', in Jonathan Hill (ed.) *Occupying Architecture*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp.23-38.
- ^v For a more detailed version of these two dimensions see: Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.17-38.
- ^{vi} The work of Hillier and Hanson is seminal in this regard, see: Bill Hillier & Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 1984; Bill Hillier, *Space is the Machine*, Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 1996.
- ^{vii} Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage, 1979; Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1984; Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- ^{viii} Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, pp.97-102.
- ^{ix} Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967, p.220.
- ^x See: Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 71; Clare Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, London: Routledge, 2002, p.46.
- ^{xi} Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, p.232.

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- ^{xii} Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus* has its roots in architecture, both Panofsky's interpretation of Gothic architecture as a system of thought written in space (which Bourdieu translated) and in his analysis of the Berber house. See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1977; Dovey, 'Silent Complicity'.
- ^{xiii} Peter Eisenman, 'Liberal views have never built anything of value', Interview by Robert Locke, July 27, 2004. Online. Available HTTP: <[HTTP://www.archinect.com/features/article.php?id=4618_0_23_0_M](http://www.archinect.com/features/article.php?id=4618_0_23_0_M)>. Accessed 7 October 2004 & 11 March 2006.
- ^{xiv} Diane Ghirardo, 'Eisenman's Bogus Avant-Garde', *Progressive Architecture*, November 1994, pp.70-73. See also responses from Eisenman, et al. in the following issues.
- ^{xv} Eisenman, 'Liberal Views'.
- ^{xvi} Paul Goldberger, *Up from Zero*, New York: Random House, 2004, pp.8-9, 145; See also: Daniel Libeskind, *Breaking Ground*, London: John Murray, 2004.
- ^{xvii} Kim Dovey & Scott Dickson, 'Architecture and Freedom: Programmatic Innovation in the Work of Rem Koolhaas' *Journal of Architectural Education*, 55 (4), 2002, pp. 268-77; Kim Dovey, 'Multiplicities and Complicities: Signifying the Future at Euralille', *Urban Design International*, 3 (3), 1999, pp.89-99.
- ^{xviii} Goldberger, *Up from Zero*, p.56; See also: Michael Sorkin & Sharon Zukin (eds), *After the World Trade Center*, New York: Routledge, 2002.
- ^{xix} Baird, 'Criticality', p.18.

^{xx} Speaks, 'After Theory', p.74.

^{xxi} Graham Gilloch. *Myth and Metropolis*, Cambridge: Polity, 1996, p.106.

^{xxii} See: Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, Boston: Little Brown, 1973; Adorno,
Minima Moralia; Benjamin, *Reflections*.

^{xxiii} Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.362.

^{xxiv} Baird, 'Criticality', p.18.

^{xxv} Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge and Power', in Neil Leach, (ed), *Rethinking Architecture*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp.371-2.

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BIOGRAPHY:

Kim Dovey is Professor of Architecture and Urban Design and Head of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. He has a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley and has published a broad range of social critiques on architecture and urban design. Recent books include 'Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form' (Routledge 1999) and 'Fluid City: Transforming Melbourne's Urban Waterfront' (Routledge 2005). Current work is focused on constructions of place identity and urban 'character'.