Can architecture be critical despite its interdependent relationship with power and profit? Critique, as some would have us believe, is dead, an unnecessary leftover from a time of emancipatory promises. We disagree. Critique is alive and kicking, and very much needed today. This book aims to demonstrate this by showcasing a range of approaches to critique and engaged architectural practices that involve design, theory, and activism.

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The Crisis of Criticality: Becoming Critically Projective

How can architecture, an artistic practice that depends more than any other on money and power, claim to be critical? In the early 2000s, the concept of criticality, that finds its early formulation in K. Michael Hays’s text Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form (1984) came under attack from a younger generation of architects and theorists who regarded it as “obsolete, irrelevant and/or as inhibiting design creativity.”¹ In the 2002 polemic, published in A+U under the title “Design Intelligence,” Michael Speaks distances himself from a series of tendencies he perceives as obsolete. As he writes, “Post-modernism, Deconstructivism, Critical Regionalism and a host of other critical architectures in the late 1980s and 1990s posed [...] as false pretenders to Modernism. [...] Stuck between a world of certainty whose demise they had been instrumental in bringing about, and an emergent world of uncertainty into which they were being thrown headlong, these theoretical vanguards were incapacitated by their own resolute negativity.”² Resistance and negation, which, according to Speaks, were at the core of these vanguards, simply made no sense anymore. Striving for an architecture “no longer under man’s control,” as Peter Eisenman, one of the key figures of that
vanguard, proposes, seemed awkward in a world that could not be controlled anyway, as it was subject to the erratic development of the globalized economy and the new distribution of political and military power. It is not by chance that the discussion on criticality started in the context of the burst of the dot-com bubble and 9/11.

As a way out of this uncomfortable situation, Michael Speaks proposes design intelligence, thus alluding to the meaning of intelligence in the context of secret service activities. Instead of being entrapped in their formal, theoretical, or professional identities, the designers following this new post-vanguard idea of design would be “accustomed [...] to open source intelligence (OSINT as it is called by the CIA) gathered from the little truths published on the web, found in popular culture, and gleaned from other professions and design disciplines.” These new practices would be “adaptable to almost any circumstance almost everywhere.”

The merit of giving this approach a catchy name goes to Sarah Whiting and Robert Somol, who, at that time, taught at Harvard and UCLA, respectively. In their text under the heretical title “Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism,” published in Perspecta in 2002, they propose a projective architectural practice focusing on performance and efficacy. Rather than looking back and criticizing the status quo, this practice projects forward alternative arrangements and scenarios, which are not necessarily oppositional. The link to the contemporary Dutch architecture is obvious, and it is no coincidence that Michael Speaks was one of its major promoters in the US. Rem Koolhaas’s remark on the subject, in its most condensed form, precludes the discussion in the US by almost a decade:

“We have to imagine 1001 other concepts of the city, we have to take insane risks, we have to dare to be utterly uncritical [...] Since we are not responsible, we have to become irresponsible.”

In retrospect, one may argue whether a projective turn in architecture has actually occurred. Certainly, market orientation and a focus on efficacy are uncritically endorsed by the mainstream architectural practices today. A ‘turn,’ however, would have equipped us with a theory of this projective practice, a set of tools that would allow us to navigate the world of the “insane risks” that Koolhaas refers to. In an early analysis of the projective, published in the Harvard Design magazine in 2004, George Baird calls exactly for this:

“It is clear that a new projective architecture will not be able to be developed in the absence of a supporting body of projective theory. Without it, I predict that this new architecture will devolve to the ‘merely’ pragmatic, and to the ‘merely’ decorative, with astonishing speed.”

Baird goes on to question the extent to which “the putatively ‘projective’ forms of practice being advocated by the new critics of criticality will develop parallel models of critical assessment with which to be able to measure the ambition and the capacity for significant social transformation of such forms.” In Baird’s view, a projective turn would have to be accompanied by a renewed critical practice going beyond resistance and negativity as its main tactics.

In search of a foundation of such a practice, it is worth referring back to Hays’s “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form,” the text that Somol and Whiting call “canonical.” For the latter, Hays’s argument boils down to the idea of resistance by negativity, which he
prominently exemplifies through Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s practice. However, in my reading, Hays’s argument is much broader, offering alternative options of an architectural practice between culture and form that may reconcile the critical with the projective.

As the subtitle of Hays’s text indicates, he explores the tension between culture and form for both the production and reception of architecture. At the extremes of this field of tension, architecture is reduced either to an epiphenomenon of culture or to an autonomous formal system that can be investigated regardless of the conditions of its formation. Hays sets his agenda with a clear problem statement:

“In this essay, I shall examine a critical architecture, one resistant to the self-confirming, conciliatory operations of a dominant culture and yet irremovable from the contingencies of place and time.”

Hays first sets out to review these two prevalent interpretative perspectives. The first position emphasizes culture as the cause and content of built form, and defines the task of the interpreter as “the study of objects and environments as signs, symptoms, and instruments of cultural values.” When the cultural situation in which the object originates is correctly reconstructed, “an ‘objective and true’ explanation of the object in question results.” The opposite position renunciates the idea of a “single ‘truth,’” and advocates a proliferation of interpretations based solely on form.” Architectural form is conceived as a product of a certain time and place, but “the origin of the object is not allowed to constrain its meaning.” Hays concedes that this approach has its benefits: it has done away with “testimonials proclaiming a work’s greatness and humanistic worth on the basis of its accurate representation of the dominant culture.” Nevertheless, proclaiming the absolute autonomy of form and its superiority over historical and material contingencies comes with a price: “Reduced to pure form, architecture has disarmed itself from the start, maintaining its purity by acceding to social and political inefficacy.”

Hays proposes an alternative position that cuts across this dichotomy by accepting architectural objects as always situated “explicitly and critically in the world — in culture, in theories of culture, in theories of interpretation itself.” This position requires a more intricate analysis of the object as “historical contingency, as well as the artefact’s persistent sensuous particularity, must all be considered as incorporated in the architectural object.”

Being situated explicitly and critically in the world is the essence of Hays’s proposal for a new positioning of the architectural object between culture and form. Why he goes on to exemplify this idea through a series of projects that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed between 1919 and 1929 is not exactly clear to the reader, and even less clear is the text’s conclusion that critical architecture can only be realized by the very attitude of silence and negation, which Hays observes in Mies’s architecture. Let us first have a brief look at these projects. The first two are the famous high-rise projects for Berlin, Friedrichstraße (1919, 1922), which Hays analyzes in relation to the condition of the metropolis in the early 20th century. While the 1919 high-rise, with its crystalline shape, is still organized hierarchically as parts composing a larger whole, the 1922 project, with its curved surfaces, is conceived as an unarticulated “unitary volume that does not permit itself to be read in terms of an internal formal logic.” For Hays, this is the perfect representation of the human condition in the metropolis as described by other authors of the time, such
as Georg Simmel. “The convex, faceted surfaces are perceptually contorted by the invasion of circumstantial images, while the reflection each concavity receives on its surface is that of its own shadow, creating gaps which exacerbate the disarray.” This reading of the building’s appearance is well supported by a charcoal drawing of the tower’s shaft by Mies, which shows a random array of vertical lines rising up from the ground. It is the sense of surface and volume, severed from the knowledge of any internal order or logic “that wrenches the building from the atemporal, idealized realm of autonomous form and installs it in a specific situation in the real world of experienced time [...]”

Hays claims to find the same qualities in Mies’s 1928 project for Alexanderplatz in Berlin. In a radical contrast to the original urban setting, which would lend itself to a circular composition, the blocks and slabs of the project are placed with hardly any reference neither to the place nor to each other. Nevertheless, for Hays, they convey meaning by their very negation of any easily comprehensible formal logic.

“Mies’s achievement was to open a clearing of implacable silence in the chaos of the nervous metropolis, this clearing is a radical critique, not only of the established spatial order of the city and the established logic of classical composition, but also of the inherent nervenleben.”

Mies’s architecture became critical by distinguishing itself from the forces that influence architecture—the conditions established by the market and by taste, the personal aspirations of its author, its technical origins, even its purpose. To achieve this, Mies, according to Hays, rendered his architecture in “implacable silence” and placed it at the very position “between culture as a massive body of self-perpetuating ideas and form supposedly free of circumstance.” The idea of “implacable silence” can hardly be applied to another work of Mies from the same period: the Barcelona pavilion that opened in 1929. Hays concedes that this building is full of references, a synthesis of Wright’s horizontal planes and the abstract compositions “of the Suprematists-Elementarists, with honorific nods to the walls of Berlage, [...] the materials of Loos, and the podium and column of Schinkel, all processed through the spatial conceptions of de Stijl.” But this, he claims, was not Mies’s intention. What looks rational and clear from a distance dissolves when the visitor approaches and enters the enclosed spaces. In Hays’s reading, Mies created a surrealistic space full of reflections and illusions without any prescribed logic of passage, an assemblage of different parts of disparate materials.

“Because there is no conceptual center to organize the parts or transcend pure perception of them, the particular quality of each material is registered as a kind of absolute.”

Space is fragmented and distorted, with any overarching logic of space and time systematically dispersed. “The work itself is an event with temporal duration, whose actual existence is continually being produced.” The artefact is nothing less than a “winning of reality,” a phrase that Hays borrows from Stanford Andersen. Though existing to a considerable extent by virtue of its formal structures, it cannot be apprehended only formally, nor does it represent a pre-existing reality. “The architectural reality takes its place alongside the real world.” Thus, the architectural world shares temporal and spatial conditions with the real one, while obstructing its absolute authority. For Hays, the Barcelona pavilion “tears a cleft in the continuous surface of reality.”
How does Hays’s interpretation of the Barcelona pavilion as “fragmented and distorted” connect with the “implacable silence” of the Alexanderplatz project designed just one year earlier? For Hays, the shared quality is resistance against both the self-confirming operations of the dominant culture and the tendency to reduce architecture to the purely formal, disengaged from the contingencies of place and time. Strangely, Hays does not regard his examples—the Friedrichstraße high-rise, the Barcelona Pavilion and the Alexanderplatz project—as different yet equally effective approaches to criticality, but he reads the history of Mies’s work backwards, reducing them to merely a prelude to the “American” Mies of the IIT campus and his later high-rise buildings. Thus, he overlooks a prime example of resistance and critique in Mies’s work that predates the Barcelona Pavilion by four years: the monument to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht (1926). During the McCarthy era in the 1950s, Mies had to explain his involvement with the Communist Party of Germany in connection with this project. He remembered being presented with the original project for the monument by a prospective client, Eduard Fuchs, a member of the Communist Party. Referring to the Doric columns of the project, Mies ridiculed them as a “fine monument to a banker,” and offered to develop a design of his own, together with the sculptor Herbert Garbe.31

Positioning oneself as the architect of this monument was a political statement not without risk. It may suffice to mention that no company was willing to produce the five-pointed stainless-steel star, the symbol of the communist Spartacus League, placed prominently in front of the monument. Eventually, five rhomboids had to be ordered and placed together as a star. The leitmotif of the monument is resistance against gravity. The wall dissolves into blocks that are composed of smaller units: the used bricks that, due to the small budget, Mies chose as the cladding material for the concrete structure. The wall’s elements start to float at various levels of detail, a seemingly abstract composition that is thoughtfully connected to the everyday by a set of small steps that lead up to a platform in front of the star.

The monument was torn down by the Nazis in 1933. Mies opposed several attempts to reconstruct it after the war, and he probably would have opposed the reconstruction of his Barcelona pavilion too, as both are examples of the architectural positions he distanced himself from. In terms of architectural historiography though, this does not diminish their value. Even if, for the “American” Mies, negativity and silence seemed the last possible form of criticality and resistance, he still had successfully explored other forms in his earlier career. Designing a monument for two murdered revolutionaries in the context of the Weimar Republic was undoubtedly a move of resistance, which he took as an opportunity to critically explore new forms of monumentality. The Barcelona Pavilion, even if, at first glance, it may appear to be an incarnation of the formalisms of modern architecture of the time, can be read, as Hays convincingly proposes, as a radical step beyond, as a fragmented and distorted space systematically dispersing any overarching logic of space and time, as “a cleft in the continuous surface of reality.”32 This is critical architecture, yet one that is built not on silence and negativity, but on a sophisticated spatial regime and numerous allusions.

These projects should suffice to support the idea that criticality does not need to be reduced to a radical denial of communication by silence and negativity, as the advocates of the projective maintain in their denunciation
of *criticality*. With its etymology from the Greek word *krinein*, criticality means simply to make or identify a difference. If a *projective* practice of architecture is the practice of projecting forward alternative arrangements and scenarios, the core of such a practice is making a difference. Thus, projective architecture cannot exist without criticality not only toward the goals of its clients but also toward itself. According to Hays, the responsibility of architectural criticism is “to concentrate on the intrinsic conditions through which architecture is made possible.”

As architectural criticism and critical historiography are “practices continuous with architectural design,” the individual consciousness of the architect “is part of and is aware of the collective historical and social situation. Because of this awareness, the individual is not a mere product of the situation but is an historical and social actor in it. There is choice and therefore the responsibility of critical architecture.”

Unless architecture today wants to see itself completely instrumentalized by neo-liberal interests and constraints, it needs to develop a *critically projective* practice, which likely needs equally as much self-criticism and the ability to critically evaluate the intrinsic conditions that make a specific project possible. This practice might have to disguise itself as cynicism (as in Rem Koolhaas’ invitation to become utterly uncritical) or as naiveté (as in Bjarke Ingels proposal of a pragmatic utopianism). But behind that disguise the goal is the same: positioning architecture explicitly and critically in the world, at the right point between culture and form.

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
7 Baird.
8 Ibid.
9 Somol and Whiting, 73.
10 Ibid.
12 Hays, 16.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Hays, 17.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Hays, 19.
21 Ibid.
22 Hays, 20.
23 Hays, 22.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Hays, 24.
27 Ibid.
28 Hays, 29, Footnote 12.
29 Hays, 25.
30 Ibid.
32 Hays, 25.
33 Hays, 27.
34 Ibid.