

Problem Seeking/Problem Solving: The Limits of Critical Practice

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The discipline of architecture, it would seem, has a superficial desire to avoid conflict. On the one hand, there is a radically pragmatist approach, such as that taken in the advanced design studio, Free Migration, taught by Keller Easterling at Yale University, in which issues of global migration and economic disparity arising from existential and embodied conflicts in fact become architecturally generative in a manner that denies the originary conflict through anti-solutionism—a design method which views plights of real subaltern peoples as opportunities for exploration rather than exhaustive resolution. Conversely, in an urban design studio at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Cities by Sea, solutionism through further "resilient" urban development (as a response to the climate crisis these very developments precipitate) was the assumed form of practice.

Taught in the fall of 2017, Cities by Sea was concerned with the retrofitting and (re)districting Boston's urban waterfronts in order to make them more resilient to the increasing threats of flooding, storm surges, and sea level rise. Students assessed sites of potential damage, loss, or vulnerability to urban infrastructure, property value, and urban resources and later proposed design and planning strategies to Boston's water edge in order to combat these ecological threats over the next 50 to 100 years. Free Migration, taught in spring 2017, tasked students with rethinking how human migrations (forced or otherwise) are discursively and practically structured by designing linkages between transit and destination that leveraged the time required for migration. Working in a fundamentally "siteless" manner, students assessed existing narratives and support infrastructures for human migration and proposed recombinations of these narratives and infrastructures to produce effectual approaches to the current refugee crisis in the Mediterranean basin that did not recapitulate institutional violence, but rather were empowering, connective, and value producing.

Both Cities by Sea and Free Migration were what are often called "critical practice studios"—intensive courses in which students propose design-based responses to contemporary, real world issues in an exploratory manner that expands the boundaries of architecture as a discipline. That is to say, that they extend the power of architecture as a field of integrated work and study to organise physical and discursive spaces and actions—what Foucault would describe as architecture's disciplinarity—through (re)enforcing its institutionalised practices in diverse contexts.¹ The reinforcing nature of this disciplinary structure, most evident in the architectural pedagogy such as critical practice studios through which it is continually reproduced, has onto-

epistemological impacts, meaning it structures and conditions in what terms and through what means architecture students come to imagine themselves and the world in which they operate. One of the ways in which these onto-epistemological impacts are manifest is the process of Othering by which those who do not subscribe to or who challenge the terms set by disciplines as the conditions for understanding the world are excluded from recognition, made to be an Other, against which the disciplinary subjects can define themselves. This process of Othering is organised around a distinction between Conflict, the necessary and constitutive encounter with the Other that holds the potential for the destabilisation of power through mutual recognition, and conflict, disputes and differences that are not constitutive of subjectivity but which nonetheless influence the relationships of social, economic, and political power. What Othering accomplishes is the suppression of Conflict and the foregrounding of conflict in order to maintain the underlying structure on which disciplinary power relations are based even as it allows for variation within the discipline over time and space relative to the conflicts it encounters. The structures of disciplinarity and their correlates in onto-epistemological processes of Othering that we will examine as essential aspects of *Free Migration and Cities by Sea* then, we would argue, are indicative of the persistence of Modernity—the institutionalised faith in rationality, progress, and individualism—as *the* defining structure of social, political, and economic relationships. To that end, despite their divergent methodologies, a reflection of the utopianism of architectural discourse that is founded on death-denying philosophies of Western Modernism can be seen in these studios. At their root, such philosophies externalise conflict by producing an “Other”, insulating the discipline from the possibility of critical reflection that goes beyond the terms the discipline itself sets. The external appearance of no conflict in the discourses that these studios then represented is an unconscious admission of the intellectually precarious propositions on which they operated.

This conversation questions the discipline of architecture's paradoxical need for conflict and its simultaneous denial of conflict. As representatives from each school and emerging voices in the field of architecture, we are invested in challenging the normativity of these death-denying philosophies as they are instantiated in the contemporary discourses of our respective institutions. We instead embrace the conflicts inherent in everyday life denied by both studios' design methodologies while rejecting the epistemological and ontological absolution manifested through Othering. We will discuss our beliefs that though architecture cannot solve particular problems, this inability does not absolve the discipline from needing to meaningfully address problems as problems. Yet the discipline cannot assume it will have solutions to intractable problems that will not reinscribe hierarchies of privilege on which the discipline itself has historically been based. This conversation seeks to (re)frame the discursive space through which the discipline understands and engages with conflict by (re)examining the relationship between praxis and pedagogy at two prominent schools of architecture.

Aaron: Over the last few years, I think we could agree, there has been a trend away from issues of formalism and esoteric theories towards “critical practice” and that this trend has become the standard, or at least more prominent, in American architecture schools' studio courses.² I think in many senses this trend is part of broader and hopefully sincere shifts within the discipline to seriously address what now feels like decades of complacency regarding the discipline's dependence on its unacknowledged complicity in cultural crises for its value and legitimacy. In other words, these critical practice studios, with their focus on pertinent contemporary global issues from refugee migration to climate change, are attempts to assert that architecture is a relevant discipline, that has a valuable knowledge-base and spatial skill set that can be put to use in solving problems and supporting cultural agendas, rather than on abstruse and self-indulgent formal language games.

Malcolm: I agree. I do think these efforts to bring the discipline closer to previously overlooked socio-political issues are in some respects timely, important, and commendable. However, I also think that they reveal a much more central, deep-seated, persistent, and problematic disciplinary need for conflict as well for a contradictory denial of conflict. This paradoxical relationship exposes a continued disciplinary attachment within the current trend of critical practice, at least in the West, to the death-denying philosophies that underscored Modernity. Namely, a desire for the end of the Hegelian dialectic and a continued faith in the Liberal Human Subject predicated on the (rational) Man vs. Nature schism. It seems that in contemporary critical practice studios like *Free Migration* at the Yale School of Architecture and *Cities by Sea* at the MIT, these age-old conflicts between life and death, thesis and antithesis, and the analytic vs. the continental, are deployed only to deny inherent contradictions between these civic and social concerns and the Modernist manner in which the discipline still operates—boiling down wicked problems to rationalist, formalist, and “objective” interventions. Or, they are at least an attempt to temporarily mitigate these contradictions through an apparent virtuosity and ingenuity of student-proposed design solutions.

Aaron: That student projects, no matter what studio they are in, are typically colloquially referred to as solutions is telling of the death-denying philosophical structure on which the discipline of architecture and architectural education are predicated. Given situations are understood to possess problems that are solvable, and whose solvability has implications for the continued existence, either of one's self or of the established order of things, and these problems must therefore be solved. In other words, problems must continuously be sought and solved, because doing otherwise risks an onto-epistemological crisis.

I think what differs from earlier periods which sought timelessness as a solution to the same conflict between life and death framed in terms of persistence of form (modernism), persistence of meaning (post-modernism), persistence of organisation (parametricism), is that

the timelessness sought today is framed in terms of its embrace of reflexive, if arbitrary, self-criticality. This reflexivity has turned the discipline itself into *the* crisis because the discipline continuously fails to define its *raison d'être*. This constant crisis of identity supports the development of strategic approaches to solving problems which maintain the apparent continual march of progress by drawing on the conflict between life and death as the impetus for further development precisely to the extent that this conflict is kept external to the discipline.

Malcolm: You bring up a critical point in clarifying the discipline's contradictory relationship with conflict. These critical practice studios reflect an emerging disciplinary ideology that offers a less disruptive means for architecture and architect to continually produce the appearance of solutions necessary for disciplinary legitimation while simultaneously denying the totality of the intractable issues these studios build upon. To do otherwise would expose the deceit inherent in proposing "solutions", and undermine the grounds from which architecture claims its value as a discipline and profession within the progress-centred onto-epistemological regime of Modernity. Despite the postmodern turn in architecture, I think the injection of the death of the meta-narrative into the discipline has ironically strengthened the discipline's resolve in Modernism by recycling the postmodern critique in a fatalist fashion.

Aaron: It sounds like what you are saying is more or less similar to the proverbial firefighter who set fires in order to be rewarded for having put them out. In order to produce evidence of its ability to solve problems, architecture in the form of critical practice studios frames problems in a particular manner that allows the discipline to prove its relevance while simultaneously denying these situations pose any true existential threat to the discipline. I think we can frame this structure of the simultaneous requirement and denial of irresolvable conflicts that provides legitimacy to the discipline of architecture under two perpetual meta-crisis cum meta-solutions: the constant need to seek and colonise new frontiers into which the discipline can expand, which we can refer to as problem-seeking (interventionism) and the constant need to demonstrate effectiveness in managing the intellectual, material, and social terrains it already occupies, which we can refer to as problem-solving (solutionism). The search for new frontiers of practice, framed by the radically pragmatist situation of critical practice studios in present conditions is, in fact, a means of ignoring past problems—the palimpsest of conquered and denuded terrains that have been continually constructed to legitimise architectural practices from labour exploitation to the conscious use of toxic materials and the complicity of architecture in perpetuating them. Instead, a disciplinary "manifest destiny" subsumes new intellectual terrain, material skill sets, and social relationships, using them to cover over or divert attention from its previous behaviours in order to sustain itself and its position within society, economics, and politics. The demonstration of effectiveness is framed within the latent and almost naive empiricism mobilised by critical practice studios to justify their outcomes, combining pseudo and "real" science to demonstrate the discipline's power to

produce "facts" or "truths", or at least the conditions for determining factuality and acting on them. By operating within this framework, when the discipline of architecture demonstrates its effectiveness through the production of facts it positions itself within the onto-epistemic meta-structure of death-denying modern philosophies: it refuses recognition of the people, places, and relationships which do not comply with its claim to producing a solution, which insist on some conflicts being irresolvable.

Malcolm: To put it another way, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the discipline, its labourers are obliged to compartmentalise their own identities in such a way that it essentially begs the question of whether individuals are onto-epistemologically defined by their own means of labour. By only embracing an affirmative response while disallowing objections to the premise of the question, critical practice studios continue the disciplinary foreclosure of alternative ideas of value that might propose a more complex and non-hierarchical structure.

Both the search for new frontiers generated by problem-seeking and the demonstrations of effectiveness generated by problem-solving manifest in critical practice studios. However, they both are commonly regarded as oppositional design methods and are positioned against one another, with problem-seeking critically framing problem-solving as reductive and totalising, and problem-solving critically framing problem-seeking as exploitation of real suffering for theoretical exercise. In doing so, the discipline feigns a false sense of innocence that purports a neutral expression towards forces outside of its own control; architecture becomes merely a medium with no stake in any conflict. However, these two methodological responses to the discipline's need for meta-solutions both perform the same onto-epistemic absolution of architecture through their continuous process of Othering in which conflictual or non-cooptable spaces and practices are constructed as "outside the discipline". These constructed "outsides" range from the nonexistent or the unknowable to the not yet understood or the not yet included, and therefore serve as both alibi and promissory frontier, or else as something over/in contradistinction to that which the discipline expresses its own power, i.e. the ineffective. The construction of this absolution through Othering arises from the discipline's unwillingness to embrace the totality of Conflict because doing so would undermine the foundational logic of disciplinary necessity. Thus, in these critical practice studios' exclamations that "the global refugee crisis is an architectural problem", or "climate change is an architectural problem", what is foregrounded is a faith in disciplinarity that cannot exclaim, "these are human problems" because this faith is built on the categorical structuring of knowledge around abstract ideas that are taken as givens and that which are somehow beyond construction through practices and discursive regimes of legitimation.

Aaron: In that sense we have yet to move past the debates between Hobbes and Boyle over the air pump, because despite architecture's postmodern turn, you bring to light how the discipline

devalues the multiplicity of lived experience in favour of measurable and therefore apparently rational and logical evidence. In essence, the discipline as a Discipline must deny the truths of Others in order to maintain its own singular and universal truth. Even with the postmodern turn and the contemporary focus on critical practice, it is clear that the discipline of architecture does not take the multiplicity of onto-epistemic regimes seriously. The discipline itself remains unquestioned. Despite, if not through paeans to interdisciplinarity or engagements with non-Western forms of practice, the core of the discipline is preserved as an autonomous and unassailable set of spatial knowledge that cannot be shared, and which is protected by a wilful inability to acknowledge other onto-epistemic regimes, such as those of indigenous peoples who do not recognise private property as properly spatial.

Malcolm: What results is a hierarchy of subjectivity which privileges architects' spatial knowledge and skills as inherently objective and having both value and merit, while coding the lived experience of Others as subjective and therefore of lesser value. Architects it would seem, in both postmodernism and critical practices, cannot be both the everyday human and a labourer within the discipline, but rather merely conflict-circumscribing organisers of language and data respectively.

I think we noted earlier, the use and denial of conflict that underscores this process of absolution through Othering is inculcated in both students and professors through the organisation of design studios within architectural education, and is thereby continuously folded into the discipline of architecture as its dominant mode of practice. In these studios, claims structured as declarative statements of judgement must be made because there is no room for ambiguity nor, more tellingly, a politics of refusal—such as autonomist Marxism in Italy in the 1960s. Further, these claims must be made within the already circumscribed boundaries of recognised and conflict avoidant disciplinary norms. They therefore foreclose the possibility of critical reflection or empathetic action.

Aaron: Exactly! A hug, or an acknowledgement that a situation "sucks" would not count as valid "solutions" to situations posed as problems because they neither seek to resolve conflict, nor are they considered inherently architectural, even if by their "staying with the trouble" they might be the most honest and useful responses possible.

All of this seems especially pertinent given the raft of critical practice studios and seminars addressing contemporary global crisis today, especially those with ostensibly anti-solutionist theoretical orientations like Free Migration headed by Keller Easterling at Yale in 2017, which focused on the ongoing migration of refugees around the Mediterranean basin. Looking back at this studio, the disjunction between theory and practice indicative of the process of absolution through Othering, respectively represented by Professor Easterling's body of critical writing and

the student design projects that were produced as part of the studio, is immediately evident.³

Malcolm: I imagine that the critically theoretical stances that Professor Easterling could put forward in writing became almost impossible to realise because they met with the resistance of engrained disciplinary structures, ways of working and thinking manifested in design studio pedagogy.

Aaron: This is quite possibly true. To that point, while what the students produced were not necessarily (just) buildings, the work did not appear to seriously question the premise that human migration was a problem to be solved and that architecture had some role in solving it, much less address whether architecture might share some responsibility in contributing to the conditions that necessitate migration or that have coded it as problematic. While this seeming structural inability to question premises is unfortunate enough because it maintains the discipline of architecture's conflict relying/denying status-quo, the discipline's need for new frontiers and to prove its effectiveness in the face of what it insists are problems, (re)casts the anti-solutionist intention as an almost superficial desire to avoid conflict.

Malcolm: I would say that by framing problems as methodological, this (re)casting erases the originary conflict, leaving only superficial oppositions. Conflict, in that sense, would instead be reductively understood as a failure of viewpoint—an inability to see the potential in a given situation—to that which the ingenious and innovative architect provides an opportunistic corrective. To that end, did you feel that in the case of Free Migration the lived experiential conflict between property and mobility were understood primarily in terms of territorial/personal sovereignty?

Aaron: Sure. I feel like critical practice studios often fail to engage with the lived complexity of the crises they are centred on because they don't acknowledge the partial and contingent nature of architectural knowledge and skills. What that leads to is the treatment of the specific crises of migration, climate change, and other globally scaled/historically rooted but locally/contemporarily experienced conflicts as interchangeable variables. Taken as variables, global issues are used to search for new methodologies and sites of practice and to prove the discipline's ability to use these methodologies and sites to solve problems. Studios like Free Migration participate in a kind of meta-problem seeking that treats the real suffering of human beings as transient research interests, in service of historically amnesiac arguments for the discipline's future value. Many of the approaches proposed by students in Free Migration were described as being equally applicable to other seemingly intractable and tenuously "similar" problems such as reconciling shifts within national demographic and economic spatial patterns. Though many of these approaches were open-ended and systemic in structure, and therefore anti-solutionist to the extent that they proposed no final static state, this systemicity was circumscribed by the

scope of what could be considered systemic and architectural, as well as by the pedagogical limitations of a single studio.

Malcolm: When reviewing the work from that studio, I'm curious as to why there were drawings of cruise ships and airports and not viral videos of students occupying the offices of elected officials along with illustrated civil disobedience manuals, or why the plight of refugees did not get injected into the discussions of urban housing, museum, and library design studios that Yale held in parallel to Free Migration. Perhaps, like the anaemic attempts by most schools of architecture to hire faculty of colour, the inclusion of a critical practice studio on a prominent issue within curricula allows the discipline to "feel" morally well-adjusted or progressive, tap into a cultural zeitgeist (that well of shared humanity beyond the limits of what the discipline can truly claim), and claim "I'M WOKE TOO", as if such a claim necessitates a congratulatory pat on the back without requiring critical self-(re)examinations or the questioning of fundamental assumptions on which the discipline operates.

Aaron: I think, more than anything, that what problem-seeking critical practice studios and the non-solution "solutions" they produce represent is the luxury of time afforded in the studio through the process of Othering that abstracts foreign trauma into methodology. This luxury allows the discipline to seek new frontiers and prove its effectiveness, because it removes it from the existential immediacy of having to deal with the same complex, day-to-day, lived reality faced by those it Others. Conflict becomes an ahistorical intellectual novelty that one gets to put down and walk away from when the stakes get too high, or when it stops opening new spaces of practice and bringing new affirmations of value.

Malcolm: It is that kind of ahistorical treatment of conflict that ignores or adulterates cultural differences and (re)inscribes the dominant onto-epistemic regime of the day (modernism, postmodernism, etc.) as a fatalist default. The ahistorical treatment of conflict you speak of present in problem-seeking studios like Free Migration is also present within problem-solving studios like MIT's Cities by Sea, taught by Alan Berger, Jonah Susskind, and Rafi Segal. I see in both studios, though for slightly different reasons, a treatment of conceptual and physical infrastructures as neutral and superficially historical, or at the very most, politicised in a manner that positions the discipline as a neutral moderator, which allows these infrastructures to be disregarded as needed in order to ensure the production of ever-new terrains of practice (sometimes literally) as well as allow for the production of evidence of the discipline's effectiveness, even when in practice these infrastructures are anything but. Contrary to Free Migration, Cities by Sea was wholly engaged in the "real" problems of climate change that affirmed problem resolution as an ethical and moral obligation of the discipline. Though the studio's intentions were laudable, the manner in which the studio operated was tautological and insistent in its solutionist prognostications of what sea level rise could mean. Only specific

socio-political and spatial approaches, already prescribed within the studio's framework, were considered as serious and viable problem-solving tactics. Conceptual or theoretical approaches were regarded as impractical or conceited, which insulated the studio's solutionist approach from any sincere criticisms and debased any alternatives to them as cynicism or conspiracy. For example, after expressing my initial reservation in engaging with the issues of climate change within a discourse of resiliency because its rhetoric reflects a design methodology that is both propagated by and (re)inscribes a culture of paranoia that I felt the studio should be critical of, my professor immediately challenged my commitment to socio-political issues as well as my resolve for humanitarian work. Rather than recognise my concern about operating under an explicit disciplinary rhetoric imbued with militarist and pro-capitalist language, the professor implied that my criticism was symbolic of me being a climate change denier, incapable of understanding the very real and immediate threats of climate change. The moral expectation was to produce solutions and not theoretically challenge the framework in which those solutions are produced. Anything deviant was regarded as non-serious, self-indulgent, and shameful. The use of shaming students has sadly become an increasing habit within architecture schools' studio courses. It is employed to ensure the production of specific solutions and neutralise the threat of conflict.

Aaron: Are you saying the morality affixed to problem-solving instils a humility when working with problems culpable for real human suffering, but when taken to an extreme, it uses shame as a tactic to avoid conflict?

Malcolm: Correct. The need for the discipline to demonstrate its own effectiveness within its own language can result in the production of evidence validating what was already assumed, allowing the discipline to operate without systemic shock to its core values. Ironically, this could be seen as an onto-epistemological resiliency.

Aaron: Your pun is ironic. I see within the discipline another paranoia—an apprehension that other disciplines (and the larger world) will discover that architecture is guilty of sustaining the intractable problems it wishes to resolve for the sake of its own legitimacy. For the past several years, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) has pushed sustainable building practices as a means to reframe the fact that buildings—in their construction and operation—are the largest contributors of global carbon emissions. It seems you are saying that the design practice of problem-solving attempts to produce solutions as a way to safeguard the discipline from a systemic admission of guilt. The AIA's solution to CO₂ emissions is not, and cannot be to stop building buildings nor is it to regulate the number of buildings being built, but rather, to produce evidence of sustainable building practices that shifts the location of conflict within the discipline from the unchecked need to continually build more buildings onto the failures of contemporary technology.

Malcolm: Exactly! It is similar to your analogy to Hobbes and Boyle's debate over the air pump. *Cities by Sea* began with analyses of strictly Western coastal cities—Copenhagen, Malmö, New York City, Amsterdam/Rotterdam, San Francisco, Miami, Hamburg, Sydney, and Newcastle—with the exception of Singapore, whose roots are deeply embedded in the British Empire and its role as global trade port. The specific attention to Western cities made sense within the framework of the studio because we were ultimately concerned with Boston's resilience against future sea level rise. These precedent cities offered parallel infrastructural concerns that we could model and apply. However, what seemed less important, if not outright irrelevant, was any discussion on the historical roles these cities and their infrastructures played in the development of the onto-epistemic regime that created the climate crisis. Rather than question the Western way of urban life and its production of "externalities", which would have been regarded as overly-theoretical and therefore impracticable, the studio accepted a fatalist position that made imagining any non pro-Western or pro-capitalist "solution" impossible. In other words, we studied Western cities not solely because they offered precedents we could apply to Boston, but also because they reflect the very urban way of life the studio was ultimately trying to preserve and protect despite the underlying contradiction of "sustainable" capitalism.

Aaron: I find this to resonate with Judith Butler's critique of MIT Professor David C. Page's mappings of the Y-chromosome and his claim that it is *the* determining gene of sex. There is a similarity between the epistemic feedback loop conditions of the laboratory to the way in which many critical practice studios are taught in American architectural schools. Both scientist and architecture student end up constructing the conditions in which they test ideas, and these are in turn studied as the conditions of truth. I wonder how we can counter the fatalist rebuttals—the selective postmodern readings the discipline utilises in the wake of the death of metanarratives to deny conflict and contradiction—that underscore the discipline's onto-epistemological framework and process of absolution through Othering? Mumbai, Bangalore, Hanoi, Karachi, Dhaka, Dakar, and Port-au-Prince are all infrastructurally rich cities that will inevitably be victims of climate change despite not contributing to it on the same scale or same manner as the cities studied by *Cities by Sea*. Yet, I can foresee your professor offering the rejoinder that their study would perpetuate, not ameliorate this inequality. I would argue that presumed commonality of cities in distant geographic and climatic regions but confederated under the umbrella of Westernism reflects the problematic side of the philosophy of kinship—Us vs. Them, the Standard vs. the Exception—that has characterised most of what appears to be mainstream architectural history and practice.

Malcolm: Architect Cedric Price famously said, "technology is the answer...but what was the question?" I feel his quotes accurately encapsulate this problem in problem-solving studios. The "applicability problem" you have mentioned in *Free Migration's* treatment of real suffering for intellectual play is also present in problem-solving studios; interventions are often de-historicised

in order to resolve the inability to comprehend totality. In these interventions, Othering becomes a means to disregard o/Other forms of knowledge that are apparent but conflicting. In *Cities by Sea*, our professors developed a "performance-based set of design and planning strategies" that students were expected to replicate in their projects. The squaring of continued capitalist-oriented urban planning and the threat of sea level rise was reduced to a four-step process, beginning with identifying critical infrastructure—power stations, fuel and food storage, and major transit systems—calling out existing soft and hard infrastructure that could provide a "thick [or redundant] line of defense" and therefore be leveraged to protect existing critical urban infrastructure from predicted inundation, and lastly upzoning/developing areas of safety and downzoning/displacing areas of high risk.⁴ These tactics were applied throughout Boston to districts that had their own distinctive economic, racial, socio-political characteristics. The deployment of these tactics relied on exiting market-logic embedded with all the bad-isms that perpetuate systems of inequality in which the opportunity of choice is foreclosed by the market itself for those subjectivised to these -isms. Because the studio operated under a capitalist fatalism, the studio (at best) could only superficially acknowledge these racial and economic inequalities. "Affordable housing", socially, physically, and conceptually amorphous and defined only in relation to market-rate, became the catchall solution representing the ubiquitous applicability of these tactics. Rather than subjugate the meta-narrative resiliency attempts to avert the injection of conflict, the studio was unable to recognise the embeddedness of its upzoning and downzoning processes within market-logic as a (re)inscription of historical power systems: green-lining, the new red-lining.

Aaron: So where does that leave us as students of architecture and the discipline at large? Neither problem-seeking nor problem-solving are panaceas in and of themselves. There are no easy answers and no one way of working is going to rectify centuries of feigned or naive disciplinary innocence.

Malcolm: I think we need to find a way to temper the methods of problem-seeking and problem-solving with one another. If architecture is a discipline that is truly concerned with the real suffering caused by intractable problems, then critical practice studios must find a way to "stay with the trouble"⁵ and inject more conflict into their frameworks; something we could best refer to as problem-posing. We must stay with the trouble and not forget the terrains of that which came before when seeking new frontiers and producing evidence of our effectiveness. Problem-posing attempts to understand existing structures, and pull them apart to help expose contradictions and propose them as the architectural intervention to destabilise a faith in authority. We need to find new theoretical frameworks that confront the rigid onto-epistemological frameworks the discipline thinks of and produces as solutions. This requires, in part, the theoretical play problem-seeking produces, but also a sincere incorporation of existing spatial, social, and ontological theoretical frameworks, including those outside the discipline, to

problematise our own truths. I think you can agree that the discipline of architecture has long claimed to be a generalist field, yet, both its professional workforce and its pedagogical canon have remained Eurocentric and exclusionary. I think we need to find a way to be comfortable with contradiction and irresolvability, and that we should strive to sincerely “seek out” and produce “solutions” to problems that keep the discipline relevant, but also generate problems that agitate our own assumptions.

Aaron: I think it would be a fair criticism to call our “solution” subpar—that we’ve taken the cliché academic route of straddling between two methods without fully committing to one, an approach often critiqued as flippant. However, I would argue that this perception is evidence of the discipline’s deeply-rooted onto-epistemological logic at work. We are trained to desire a resolved and non-conflictual response that argues within an either/or logic. I think our desire for problem-posing could be read by our critics as a cop-out *because* it creates a conflict of clarity and purity. I think we are ultimately calling for contradiction. And this means finding a way to use critical theory in a manner that does not allow the performative use of critical theory to shut down the potential of critique to bring about effective change. In other words, finding a way in which the discipline can use critical theory that acknowledges the need for consistent conflict while producing solutions at the same time.

I think both studios are valid in addressing the complexities of modern life, and are applicable to the multifaceted frameworks of everyday existence—there are real problems that need to be solved—but we also need to find problems and use them as a means to think in a future-forward, generative, and radically pragmatic manner. And we can also wish to see the discipline support a studio space that proposes problems and agitates the discipline itself because all three prime or foreground the irreconcilable role that conflict plays and that conflict is not bound by the theoretical walls of a discipline.

Malcolm: I whole-heartedly agree, and I think introducing a methodology of problem-posing begins to chip away at the “rational” Man vs. Nature schism. Architectural education should stop treating its students like abstract entities and provide them with the dignity and the ability to be imperfect and problematic. So much of contemporary education mimics Paulo Freire’s concept of “the banking-system”.⁶ This is especially so within professional degrees like medicine, law, and architecture where their education models reify the philosophy that subjectivity is defined by labour and a universal Liberal Human Subject. However, while universal humanism provides a unique way of thinking about our shared existence in this world as separate from Nature, it is also predicated on the denial of personal humanism(s) while insisting on individuality. I think we cannot forget the productive tension of the conflictual narrative of the individual within the collective—something between agonistic pluralism and imagined communities.

Aaron: We should acknowledge that there is a privilege in the conversation in the two of us agreeing on many points. We more or less had a conversation about the need for conflict and problem-posing without a conflictual voice interjecting. I find this to be disappointing, and part of a larger problem of intellectual homogenisation that we are both to a degree party to as students in institutions of elite American architectural academia. The lack of dissenting voices, or the voices of people historically excluded from engaging with the discipline of architecture is perhaps one of the reasons we both feel so disenchanting with critical practice studios. I think the lack of outside voices in architecture and in this conversation is not because we do not want to engage voices that are conflictual to our own, but because we have almost unconsciously adopted the discipline-developed vocabulary and methodology, which exclude the participation of others. It is troubling, because even acknowledging this kind of constructed privilege seems to systematically reinscribe it. But then again, that is the attitude that absolution-seeking gives rise to. Maybe as a start, we all need to get okay with being a little less comfortable in who we talk to.

Malcolm: Ironically, I agree.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 222.
2. Examples of this trend are numerous enough to warrant a course on their precedents and journal articles discussing their overall relationship to the discipline. "Precedents in Critical Practice," MIT Architecture, accessed 15 March 2018, <https://architecture.mit.edu/subject/fall-2011-4210>; Jane Rendell, "Critical Architecture: Introduction," *The Journal of Architecture* 10:3 (2005), doi:10.1080/13602360500162501.
3. Easterling's writing regarding critical practice and design pedagogy is perhaps best summarised in her recent series of lectures, courses, and a book, all entitled *Medium Design* and all advocating for anti-solutionist stances. Keller Easterling, *Medium Design* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2018).
4. Rafi Segal, Alan Berger, and Jonah Susskind, 4.163J/11.332J: Urban Design Studio—Cities by Sea, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Architecture (2017).
5. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).