

# *Increasing the critical mass: emphasising critique in studio teaching*

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Critique is an indispensable part of the design process, providing a crucial feedback loop to reflect and improve on the quality of design. While critique is a well-established practice in some design disciplines, for landscape architecture a critical culture is yet to develop. As a relatively recent profession, which some have argued is more practice than theory-orientated, critique has not been a priority. However, for the advancement of design thinking, and to ensure quality in the built environment, the development of critique is a significant consideration for landscape architecture. The studio environment provides an ideal opportunity to develop critical skills which graduates can take with them into the professional environment. This paper outlines the present climate of critique within the discipline of landscape architecture, and then explores some of the issues and opportunities for enhancing students' critical capacity in relation to self-critique and the critique of built works.

**I**N THE YOUNG PROFESSION OF landscape architecture, which is particularly young in places like New Zealand and Australia, critique has not been a priority. However, critique is crucial for the advancement of the profession as a protection against stagnation and degeneration; through increasing the profile of critique in the studio, the profession will ultimately benefit. Critique requires a climate of maturity in the profession and discipline, something that is challenging even more established countries like the United States and United Kingdom. In the first part of this paper I evaluate the state of critique in the profession and discipline of landscape architecture, and in the second part I propose how critique might be integrated more fully into the studio.

The notion of critique can be interpreted in a variety of ways. At one extreme, 'virtually everything people do in and about the built environment is a form of criticism' (Attoe, 1978, p xii). At the other extreme criticism is seen as an arcane practice of highly specialised experts. In addition to this continuum from a populist to a specialist endeavour, there are varying views about whether critique necessarily involves judgement. Attoe provides a useful distinction between three orientations for criticism: normative, interpretive and descriptive. Normative criticism is based on some kind of standard, doctrine, system, type, or measure against which judgements can be made. Interpretive criticism is not concerned with evaluation and judgement, but attempts to reveal the environment in an impressionistic, evocative, or advocatory way. Descriptive criticism is also non-judgemental, focusing on unfolding the context of the work (Attoe, 1978).

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Populist critique, specialist critique and the three orientations for criticism all have value in enhancing our understanding of the built environment. However, in this paper I am focusing on critique by designers for designers; critique is seen as an integral part of the design process. All three perspectives on critique – normative, interpretive and descriptive – have a role to play, and there needs to be an awareness of the function of each. I recognise the value of critique that is solely interpretive or descriptive, but to make a positive contribution to design development critique must involve evaluation. Dictionary definitions of critique are generally unhelpful, inevitably emphasising the negative connotations of the word – related to ‘finding fault’ – which have made the topic fraught with emotion. Critique derives from the Greek root *krinein*, which is to judge or to decide, and is linked to ‘criteria’, reminding us of the need for an explicit basis for any judgements. My working definition of critique is therefore: the practice of evaluating design in an informed manner, based on an understanding of the content and context of the work, and the design languages on which it draws.

### *Critique and maturity*

Critique requires a capacity for judgement and the ability to both give and take criticism. These are skills and dispositions that develop with maturity, both of the individual and of the profession. In addition to these general prerequisites for critique, it appears that landscape architecture as a profession faces some specific barriers to the development of a culture of criticism. In 1972 Fein stated that the profession of landscape architecture was more craft-orientated than theoretical in outlook (in Fabos, 1979, p 1.6), and Manning suggested that the ‘common perception [is] that landscape design is an empirical process lacking a theoretical base to support what is actually practised: to explain why it “works”’ (Manning, 1995, p 77). This echoes the words of Hubbard and Kimball some years earlier in their seminal textbook on landscape architecture, that: ‘Nearly all the trained men in the field are giving their energies to active practice rather than theorization or writing’ (1919, p vii).

Walker and Simo suggest that the lack of theorising and critique can be attributed to the very nature of landscape architects themselves, suggesting that they tend to be ‘reticent, discreet, accommodating and not given to undue publicity’ (1994, p 3). They observe that ‘landscape architects tend to be doers rather than critics or philosophers [and that] they have tended to focus on the practical work at hand’ (1994, p 4). Walker and Simo further suggest that the perceived role of landscape architecture as a setting for objects (mainly architecture) has been a hindrance to the development of the practice of critique. The dominance of architectural criticism has also tended to repress the emergence of critique within the discipline of landscape architecture. Meyer believes that it is necessary to ‘recover the historic ground upon which contemporary landscape architects construct their theories and practices’, contending that ‘this history is poorly served by the discourses of modern art and architectural history which have relegated the landscape to a minor, repressed or misrepresented other’ (1994, p 13).

The United Kingdom is arguably the mother country of Western landscape design yet – even with a two hundred-year legacy of theory and practice – there are calls to enhance the quality of critique. In 1994, Hopkins called for critique to move beyond the ‘anecdotal and relatively personal’ (1994, p 24). The profession of landscape architecture has just celebrated its first centenary in the United States, yet in 1991 McAvin highlighted the absence of a common theoretical infrastructure in landscape architecture. She stated that, ‘unless a critic specifies such an infrastructure as an integral part of each criticism, the criticism remains apparently arbitrary and idiosyncratic – without wider implications’ (1991, p 155). New Zealand, by comparison, has only recently reached the 25-year milestone of the profession, with ongoing tensions apparent between critique and practice. Densem earlier suggested the profession’s youth was a reason to avoid criticism, stating: ‘There is no point in being hypercritical in an industry which is still so immature and undefined’ (1987, p 4). The question therefore remains: when will the profession mature sufficiently to both give and take criticism?

The journals of the landscape architecture profession are a primary forum for critique. Yet, as McAvin notes, ‘Professional journals seldom venture beyond journalistic reporting to critical assessment of specific works in context ... The closest such publications come to criticism are essays by or interviews with designers offering briefs for the critical stances represented in their own work or comments about award-winning projects made by jurors in theatrical simulations of academic design reviews’ (1991, p 221). The establishment of the *Critiques of Built Works of Landscape Architecture* run by Bruce Sharky at the Louisiana State University is a promising development within the discipline of landscape architecture. There is a need to develop ‘an awareness of the need for well-written critiques of built works’ so that ‘the level of quality in built works will be improved’ (LSU flyer, 1994). However the circulation of this publication is limited, and has an academic rather than professional focus.

In New Zealand publications concerning design critique in landscape architecture reflect McAvin’s observations. The profession’s forum for critique is the magazine *Landscape New Zealand*. Much of the reporting tends to be descriptive rather than critical, and critique can still be received negatively, emphasising the adolescent state of the profession. The same appears to be true in Australia, as Wellman and Paterson observe in *Landscape Australia*:

It is hoped that this [framework for critique] will interest others in defining what is good in Australian landscape architecture design and heighten awareness of the limitations and opportunities which arise from the Australian culture, environment and resources and in particular materials, construction technologies and practice, and through this generate subsequent discussion on these issues in the literature, a discourse sorely needed by both students of landscape architecture and design practitioners (1994, p 195).

During a round table discussion on critique and the profession held recently at the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architecture’s Auckland branch, a practising

landscape architect highlighted one of the key deterrents for many professionals to either giving or receiving critique in a public forum – she identified the issue of commercial sensitivity as problematic. Public, negative critique could damage future relationships between designer and client, leaving the client feeling they have not received value for money. Critique is therefore suppressed by the profession, with only bland descriptions of projects being published. The problem is exacerbated in countries like New Zealand, where the landscape architectural profession is small. A concern with not offending colleagues appears to override a responsibility towards the designed landscape.

It seems that critique is inevitably seen as being negative and destructive, rather than contributing to an ongoing understanding and positive response towards the evolving landscape. Yet, as Manning points out, criticism ‘if properly carried out, is not a negative but [is] itself a creative process’ (1995, p 85). The distinction between critique – a constructive and creative act – and wanton destructive criticism appears to be related to maturity. While the profession and discipline move towards a mature attitude towards critique, educators should also be aware of the need for a similar increase in sophistication amongst landscape architecture students. In New Zealand the culture of critique is not strong within society as a whole; consequently, local students have not been immersed in this kind of environment. Debates over design issues are generally argued at a fairly crude level, along the lines of ‘I don’t know much about art ... or architecture ... or landscape architecture ... but I know what I like’. Students entering the studio environment are therefore ill-prepared to give or receive critique. In addition, critique needs a solid grounding in theory to be meaningful, and this takes some time to develop. As Treib observes: ‘There is an idea structure behind criticism. This is the link between criticism and theory. Criticism is a crucial link between theory and practice’ (in Berrizbeitia, 1997, p 10). It takes time for this structure to develop, and for the student to reach the level of sophistication needed to use it meaningfully.

Fostering the development of students’ capacity for critique is a key role for landscape architecture educators. Dana Cuff observes of architectural education:

The school has to help the students to reflect upon the issues they see in practice ... We should be challenging people to think more broadly about architecture and have vision about what they are doing, to be able to critique and take a critical view of what they do. Over the long run, the profession is its own engine for evolution and renewal (in Crosbie, 1995, p 94).

The challenge is how to integrate critique meaningfully into studio.

### *Bringing critique into studio*

When acknowledging the broader issue of the lack of critique in the professional community, one of the challenges for studio educators is to foster a culture of critique in the studio environment. The development of skills in critique enhances the students’ education in a range of ways. First, and most importantly, it enhances

their design ability by enabling students to make judgements about their own work. Second, it prepares them for taking an active role in the professional community – encouraging them to critique the work of their peers in a constructive way. Third, it assists students in becoming responsible members of the community, making informed judgements about developments in the built environment, and empowers them to contribute constructively to design debates. My explorations of critique in the studio have focused on these three aspects of critique: self-critique, peer critique and critique of built work. Self-critique is in some ways the most difficult, and requires techniques for mentally distancing yourself from the work. Turner suggests a strategy of ‘DIY criticism’, where he advises considering your work from seven other perspectives: financiers’, contractors’, users’, maintenance teams’, photographers’, animals’ and lawyers’ (1996). However, the ongoing challenge is to emphasise critique as an integral part of the design process. Recently I presented a ‘motivational’ lecture on critique to summer school students at Lincoln University. The students were very receptive to the notion of critique, but claimed they did not have time to actually do it. My response was to reiterate the co-dependency of design and critique, that you cannot have one without the other and expect any improvement. As Hopkins suggests, ‘If it is done thoughtfully, criticism can be as much a creative act as design itself’ (1994, p 24) McAvin’s comments reiterate the point: ‘Criticism is not only interpretive and evaluative, it is also creative’ (1991, p 156).

Peer critique can be approached in a range of different ways in the studio context. While in professional practice a peer might be a colleague or other professional, within the studio it is classmates or the tutor. This is an aspect of studio teaching often taken for granted – what many of us know as the ‘crit’. As Meyer asserts:

Criticism is inextricable from a studio-based curriculum carried out through individual critiques, group pin-ups, and public reviews. While lectures and demonstrations offer certain lessons, such as the teaching of history and technology or specific drawing and modeling techniques, the majority of one’s education as a designer of landscapes occurs through doing, and then listening to a critique of one’s work (in Crandell and Landecker 1998, p 18).

In order to enhance this interaction between students as a group, or as individuals with the tutor, it may be useful to make the foundation of the critique more explicit than *ad hoc*.

When I asked a group of first-year students to do a peer critique of each other’s work they were horrified, and said they thought only teachers could do critique. Yet, on realising that they were familiar with the body of theory to which the project related, their confidence increased. Through participating in a systematic critique of a randomly selected classmate’s project, their overall understanding of the studio was considerably enhanced. Their ability to self-critique also improved. This was put into practice when they were told they had to return to the projects they believed they had ‘finished’ and redo them. Once their disgruntlement at having to

do more work had passed they welcomed the opportunity to rework their projects. The process of giving and receiving critique, together with the revelation that design is not 'done' when you hand it in, resulted in an appreciable improvement in the standard of design. Many of the written evaluations of this project identified the peer critique as the most enjoyable part of the process.

Peer critique – like peer review of manuscripts – can be a demoralising experience. However a good critic, like a good referee, becomes part of the process rather than an end to it. Students therefore benefit from an environment where critique is integrated into the studio in a constructive manner. There is also a sense that students need to be prepared for life beyond the studio, and to develop strategies for responding to the potential range of reactions to their work in the 'real world'. The recent publication *The Crit: An Architecture Student's Handbook* (Doidge, Sara and Parnell, 2000) provides a useful guide to studio critiques. The authors encourage students to approach crits positively and to expand the ways in which reviews might take place.

The final focus for critique is the broader environment, particularly the critique of 'built works'. This aspect of critique is the most overt within the discourse of the profession, and examples exist of frameworks for criticism of landscape architecture. One such example is proposed by Wellman and Paterson; they suggest nine criteria as a framework for the critical analysis of Australian landscape architecture design. Their concern is with the detail of design, and their focus is on the 'relationship between the designer, concept and constructed design' (1994, p 195). In summary, the criteria suggested are: continuity of design thinking from concept to master plan; detail which shows understanding of potential use; detail appropriate to local context; reflection of qualities of materials and construction; same level of resolution in large and small scale spaces; cognisance of disability where appropriate; detail supporting the broader concept; functional, structural and drainage effectiveness; and awareness of impact on the environment.

Wellman and Paterson provide a framework for what Attoe would term 'normative criticism' – 'a conviction that somewhere in the world *outside* a building or urban setting there is a model, pattern, standard or principle against which its quality or success may be assessed' (Attoe, 1978, p 1). While the framework does not provide absolute standards, the use of imperative language suggests a doctrinal approach that is one form of normative criticism. For example, Wellman and Paterson write that 'Work should exhibit a knowledge and respect for the properties of the materials used and an economy in the construction methods employed' (1994, p 95), with a hint of the doctrine 'less is more' embedded in the word 'economy'.

This normative approach based on nine criteria is potentially dangerous in the hands of a less-skilled critic such as a student of landscape architecture. The assessment of success in each of the criteria is problematic as they are what Attoe terms 'vague doctrines', which encourage 'easy, right/wrong formulations' (1978,

p 14). For example, what does it mean if a work does *not* demonstrate an 'economy in the construction methods employed'? Is it therefore a poor design? The criteria lend themselves to a 'box-ticking' exercise, where a design might score nine out of nine. But while the design may have satisfied all of the criteria in parts, it might still be a poor design over all. Through reducing the critique to a number of points, an integrated evaluation is not encouraged. While this checklist might help demystify the nature of criticism it also dumbs it down – critique is an art and not a science.

Another framework is proposed by Robert Riley (1991) who presents five questions to be used in the criticism of landscape architecture:

- *What is the designer trying to achieve in the work?* Riley notes the importance of understanding the designer's intentions as a basis for understanding the work.
- *What is the internal/evolutionary context of this work?* This question refers to the design, its place within an artistic tradition and genre.
- *What is the external context of this work?* With this question Riley probes the social, political and ideological setting of the work.
- *How successful has the designer been in achieving his or her goals?* This question is both internal and external, covering everything from technique and craft through to social success.
- *Were the goals set, and the work generated, appropriate?* This questions everything from the work's function as intended, to social equity and moral issues.

Riley's framework employs a range of modes. The first three questions generate descriptive criticism, 'establish[ing] a foundation for understanding through various forms of explication' (Attoe, 1978, p 85). The subsequent questions are more evaluative, requiring the critic to make judgements on success and suitability. Riley highlights the difficulty of gauging 'success' at a time of constant change in design, and says 'it's the kind of question more easily asked in a time of standard techniques, materials and styles ...' (1991, p 167).

Wellman and Paterson's and Riley's frameworks provide a breadth of considerations for making judgements about the designed landscape. However, while the former is problematic because of its disaggregated, reductive approach, the later is too broad in the evaluative criteria to be of use to students. Other examples were also explored, such as Manning's approach to the valuation of the University of York (1995), and Domosh's method for interpreting landscape (1989). These frameworks are complementary in providing a depth of understanding of the work, yet none on its own satisfies my working definition of critique: to evaluate design in an informed manner, based on an understanding of the content and context of the work, and the design languages on which it draws.

As part of a field exercise in evaluating the built environment, I attempted to formulate a user-friendly framework to enable students to critique a range of designed sites. My intention was to make the process of critique explicit and to clarify the different components of the judgement. At that stage I was not familiar with Attoe's text which analyses architectural criticism in terms of method (or

orientation), rhetoric and settings. In retrospect, Attoe's analysis clarifies my efforts to bring normative, interpretive and descriptive critique together. Through breaking this process down into five standpoints, I hoped to demystify the nature of critique and to encourage them to become more involved. Each standpoint required the students to evaluate the design as a whole, rather than as a set of criteria. Each group adopted the five standpoints in turn, over five sites, so that they were challenged to exercise the scope of the critical frame.

- *Functional* – identifying the intended function of the site and making a judgement about how well this is achieved. Particular attention is to be paid to issues such as circulation, shelter and so on. Comparing intention with outcome forces a considered critique of function, rather than a simple good/bad judgement. For example, the tree grille and seat arrangement in Figure 1 also provides a convenient rubbish bin, but is not intended for this purpose and therefore does not perform well in terms of removing accumulated material. In the broader setting of the site there is evidently a lack of convenient rubbish bins, suggesting as a whole it does not function well as a place to eat takeaway foods.
- *Symbolic* – analysing the ways in which a site communicates. For example: street names, signs, sizes and shapes of objects, forms and scale. Cultural signatures became important for the students in their investigations of the sites. For example, the building in Figure 2 was described as 'corporate pin stripe' – an interpretive critique.
- *Political* – detecting any power differentials exhibited by the site: looking for signs of ownership (signage, tagging) and exclusions (for example: of women, and people with disabilities). One of the important aspects of undertaking the critique within the urban environment was the interpretation of the context of the sites. The students found that changing social settings were revealed by markings on some sites. For example, one area (Figure 3) had become the target of taggers, in sharp contrast to the former cultural signature of this site – an elite fashion boutique. The sense of ownership of this small side street has changed, with the precinct 'claimed' through the activities of the taggers. The arrival of the Department of Courts in this part of the city has evidently changed the political grain of the area, as revealed through a critique of the power differentials on the site.
- *Legibility* – ascertaining how well the site reads, for example: how apparent is the intended engagement with the site? Are boundaries between different parts of the site clear? Is it easy to orientate yourself in the site or is it confusing? Is this intentional or unintentional? On one site we visited, students noted how a poorly articulated entry had been 'fixed' by having the word 'entry' appear three times on the side of the building (Figure 2). The labelling was seen as a form of 'band aid' for poor legibility.
- *Philosophy* – determining the philosophical basis of the site and its consistency with this. This was the most challenging standpoint, and the groups struggled to

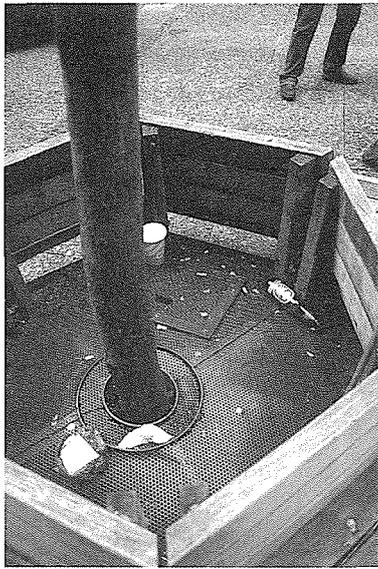


Figure 1: Function: a seating arrangement that has become a rubbish bin

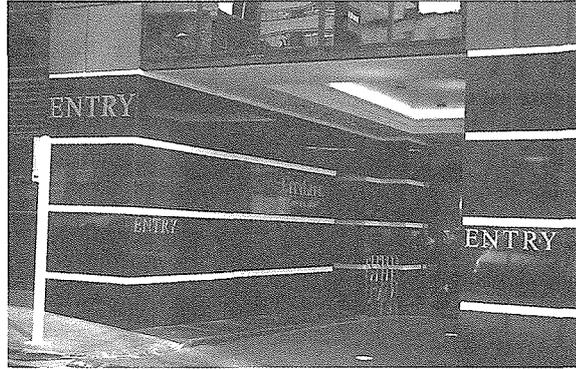


Figure 2: Symbolism and legibility: the 'corporate pin stripe' building with its 'band aid' labels



Figure 3: Politics: tagging on the Christian Dior Boutique

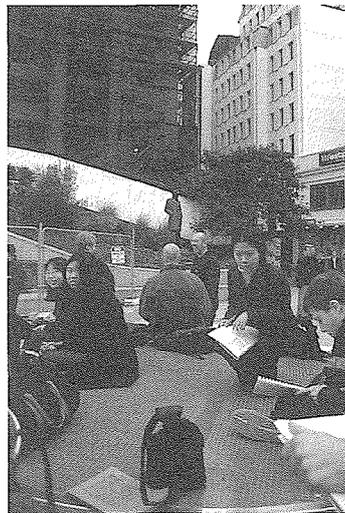


Figure 4: Symbolism and philosophy: military icons in Freyberg Place

Figure 5: Alternative philosophies: the ground plane structured by an abstract painting

come to terms with what the design philosophy was for each site in question. The site where philosophical inconsistency was clearly manifested was one that appeared to combine two seemingly arbitrary philosophical stances. On one hand, a designer had been inspired by the military symbols associated with Colonel Freyberg, whose statue stands in the square (Figure 4). Light shades resembling the noses of aircraft or missiles were consistent with this symbolic approach. However, the ground surface and raised platforms (Figure 5) appeared to have an entirely different design philosophy. This, we later learnt, resulted from using an abstract painting as a plan for the site – something only apparent to those high up in the surrounding tower blocks. The two philosophical stances did little to complement each other and as an assemblage the square was less than the sum of the parts.

The framework was also intended to convey the idea that critique is not only a negative appraisal. Through couching the criteria in such a way that both positive and negative responses were encouraged, the constructive nature of critique could be pursued. Moreover, the intention was to emphasize the need for thorough understanding of a site before critique, thus highlighting the grounds on which criticism is based. The intention was also to make the students aware of their own bias in critique, by encouraging different perspectives. Critique is not an objective process, and the subjectivity needs to be made explicit. As Barthes suggests:

all criticism is criticism both of the work under consideration and of the critics ... Or, to express the same thing in ... another way, criticism is not in any sense a table of results or a body of judgments; it is essentially an activity, that is to say a series of intellectual acts inextricably involved with the historical and subjective ... existence of the person who carries them out and has to assume responsibility for them (in Attoe, 1978, pp 7–8).

The exercise was a fruitful one and, although the range of standpoints is by no means definitive, it provided enough hooks for the students to tackle the issue of critique. Before the trip the students were asked to record their understanding of critique, which included phrases such as ‘descriptive analysis’. While such definitions *are* forms of critique, for the purposes of increasing design understanding (and ultimately improving the quality of the built landscape) post-field trip references to ‘balanced judgement’ suggest the development of a more proactive stance.

### *Conclusion*

Increasing the profile of critique within the culture of the design studio is a challenging prospect for landscape architecture educators. The culture within the profession at large appears to have yet to reach a stage of maturity where critique is completely welcome. In addition, educators often approach ‘crits’ in an *ad hoc* fashion, emphasising intuition rather than intellectual rigour. While intuition is a significant aspect of design education, it is impossible to teach. Through making critique more explicit, students are provided with a framework with which to

approach their own design work, a judgement of their peers' work, and of the wider environment. Treib's comments provide an appropriate take-home message:

Criticism is essentially an optimistic enterprise. No matter how scathing the comments, there is still the underlying belief in the perfectibility of human activity, with some assumption that if we can just understand the picture more completely, we can design in a better way (in Berrizbeitia, 1997, p 9).

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