A MATTER OF
OPINION

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY
ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM
A CRITICISM CONFERENCE
AT THE KNOWLTON SCHOOL
OF ARCHITECTURE THE OHIO
STATE UNIVERSITY

APRIL 11, 2009—KNOWLTON HALL AUDITORIUM 10AM-5PM

THROUGH PRESENTATIONS OF CURRENT WORK
BY A SELECT GROUP OF ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS, THEORISTS AND CRITICS, THIS
SYMPOSIUM SURVEYED AND ANALYZED THE
TECHNIQUES OF DESCRIPTION, DISCERNMENT
AND DISCRIMINATION IN RELATION TO THE
ISSUES OF ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM TODAY—

ORGANIZED BY JOHN McMORROUGH

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Ana Miljacki [AM]: It seems to me that all of your presentations have a relationship to time in a sense. I wonder when time intersects something like ugliness, does it really stay true, does the concept survive? Your talk, Timothy, sort of suggested that we start with ugliness and we end with ugliness. In Jeanne’s presentation, the notion of forecasting as opposed to looking backward is an interesting one to me. In a way I’m not sure yet how ’82 intersected that idea of looking forward. For the constraints, I actually have a question again of how we engage this as a contemporary way of looking at architecture. I think it still needs to be teased out in the conversation.

For ugliness, a number of us looking at this building now might think it’s beautiful, even though you would like to convince us by the end that it is in fact ugly. Or still ugly. For me, I thought the moment the paper did something interesting was when it went to irritating and affects. Even then, I’m wondering if there is a lifespan to affects or whether there’s a cultural timeline onto which they map.

Timothy Hyde [TH]: For me, the temporal dimension you’re referring to was the key thing. As I started to work on this, ugliness seemed to me to be a way of describing something that is only produced over time. The building wasn’t ugly when it was voted Britain’s ugliest building. If it was, what ugliness meant in that case was extremely narrow and not very useful. Similarly, people then thought it was beautiful too, and their opinion of its beauty was also too narrow and not very useful. Ugliness, the way I’m laying it out, is something that only exists as a diachronic span. There’s not an increase or decrease in ugliness in any kind of precise way, and it probably does have a beginning or an end. Ugliness is only a useful concept or to me an interesting one when it’s describing a compound of many things. The ugliness of the building only really occurred once the project of alteration commenced. That’s when it actually became ugly because then there was an identification of deficiencies, lacks and so on.

I would say ugliness is something purely temporal. It’s not ever synchronic. An ugliness that you would identify as a synchronic moment is a fairly useless one or it’s a single bandwidth, it doesn’t have the compound. I think the ugliness concept has other avenues for me, but one of the things that’s been interesting working on it is to describe a temporal condition, a temporal state in this broader way as opposed to identifying, as one would historically, these little momentary conditions. I think you’re on to something with a temporal cut.

AM: So we should keep going. With the Design Awards, since we are in a category of qualitative judgments, we never quite see what the criteria are, regardless of whether they are backward or forward. I guess backward or reactive as you call them is easier than projective. I’m still wondering what it would mean to give a projective guideline to this jury for the design awards.

Jeannie Kim: I don’t have an answer to that question, because there are so many built-in temporal delays even to the idea of having this accolade because of all the requirements. There has to be a certain
body of work, there’s a delay built into the
discipline anyway. For that built-in delay to
trickle into the jury members who are all
from other disciplines, there isn’t a moment
where the awards can actually be predictive
or projective. Obviously when you’re in that
moment it’s difficult to recognize anyways. I
think that in terms of the exhibition and the
potential to end it by saying that perhaps
this is the end of the projective moment that
we didn’t recognize in 1982. It’s a cop-out I
recognize, but maybe it allows for the end of
something and more attentiveness to what
comes next. I don’t know if what you’re ask-
ing is possible, but I’m also in it, so it’s hard
for me to say.

Similarly, the one part of the ugliness
that I find can’t go away is the Brutalist
cement technique. That’s just what it looks
like. The water is a really smart attempt, but
in a way that’s never going to go away. At
some point that’s going to stop being ugly
and it’s just going to be a trope.
I also find that with all the techniques
for moving and for creating, those are also
very 1969. Say something about technique.

**Jeffrey Kipnis (JK):** When you answer
her question, could you synthesize it for us?

**TH:** What emerges if you change the focus
to technique as the question suggests… is
that good, Jeff?

**JK:** This should be interesting for Enrique
because he’s getting the opportunity to use
an imposed arbitrary constraint.

**Enrique Walker (EW):** But it’s not too
constraining, you’re giving me too much
freedom.

**TH:** When you switch the valence over to
technique, saying what’s being discerned
here is a set of techniques, the question it
foregrounds is that what’s being fashioned
by any one of these judgments is a design
genres or a redesign of genres. I think of
genres as the manifestation of techniques.
Genres consist of a kind of assembly of
techniques with a certain kind of hierarchies
imposed on them such that they become
internalized. This doesn’t apply to all discri-
plines, but for those that have genres, that’s
how it happens. So what could be produced
out of something like the awards project
is not a projection of trends, but a transformation from an existing known genre into another one. I was very struck by the categories that came and went, especially the American Original. There were only two years of that. It's sort of like, "We'll try that out as a genre," but it didn't work out so we'll move to a different sort of framing.

It occurred to me also in Enrique's because of the clear focus on the novel and the film as the most advanced use of constraint among certain creative disciplines. Those are the two that have been able to produce such a precise sense of constraint. But it is also because those are disciplines in which genre is already foregrounded, so you can look at techniques and start to think about how you transfer one genre into its next evolution. I don't know if it's similar in architecture or not, but that would be my answer.

**EW:** The main question is one of mobilizing the old and dismissed idea of problem solving, where you basically solve a problem of a different sort, allowing you to respond to the problem you really need to solve. Of course it's an applied technique, because you're giving yourself a MacGuffin, you're devoting yourself to something that has nothing to do with what you really have to do, such that it illuminates what you really have to do. Of course there isn't such a thing as what you really have to do, so you'll probably still have to formulate it. It's about mobilizing problem solving as a crucial part of the equation of design.

**LA:** Will any technique do for that?

**EW:** That's actually what's interesting about constraints. You have to meet the problem that you've given yourself to meet. It doesn't matter how. In other words, in the end quantify whether it's literary or not. The one I presented is in fact more interesting in my view because it has no positive quantifiable constraint, because that could only be mobilized toward said goal rather than towards a legitimizing origin. In other words, in one of the two you can actually be obedient without paying attention to whether what you're actually producing is of interest or not.

**JK:** I have two questions. Is the novel without an e a good novel?

**EW:** I personally don't like that novel. That would be my argument.

**JK:** Okay, good, because generally the critique of the pataphysical production is that by using, in some sense, the received body of evaluation, it's always been considered inert. When you reintroduce it—and I'm definitely in favor of the project of reintroducing it—the body of work you're referring to is generally not considered successful simply because it's inert, it's evidence of its own process without occupying either the genre or a discipline's conventions like in the novel.

**EW:** But I think that's precisely the argument. I think that's quite helpful as a question, because if we take, for instance, the problem of writing a novel without the letter e. If we ask everyone in the audience, some people may not be able to do it, some may be able to write the novel, some may be able to make something of interest. But basically there's nothing in the constraint that would show the ultimate value of the piece.

**JK:** Let's say I'm a chef, and I've decided to produce a menu where every item is going to start with the letter e: cucumbers, chicken, whatever. I can do that, and I might be able to do it less or more creatively, but the question is whether that contributes to the evolution and the promiscuous production of culinary effects because I'm still tied to that discourse—or not. And I think that the criticism of having a cool method is that it's never been able to equal the criticism of process. In the end, it's never able to expand the repertoire of salient consequences.

**EW:** But the argument is that it could, but it's not enough. You need to have, let's say, a certain historical knowledge to see what the issues are you're tackling, and to what end you're actually using or embracing that constraint. The main argument—and this is why I was in favor of the vanishing structure—is that meeting the constraint in itself is not the deed. That's simply the potential precondition for opening up otherwise unexpected possibilities. But then you need to judge.

**JK:** But judge on what basis?

**EW:** On the basis of a different problem. You don't judge whether it has a letter e or doesn't, but you're concerned about a certain problem of narrative that has nothing to do with that problem of including or excluding the letter e. It may be, let's say, the structure of flashback, and perhaps by chance encounter the absence of the letter e because of a certain exclusion that was coming together with a certain existing structure of flashback would allow for something differ-
ent. But then it's always about the constraint together with an active exercise of judgment, which I think is what process usually precludes.

Only if you annihilate the origin can you afford to make an argument as to why the piece is valuable. In the case of Life: A User's Manual, which in my view is a novel of a novel kind, let's say, it's unimportant, and you can't quantify to what extent Perec used the structure or not. What matters is actually the outcome, because then the structure completely vanishes, as opposed to the novel without the letter e which is the one preceding that, that I would say is a slightly more conventional novel that simply gets to the acrobatic level of not using a high percentage of words in the French dictionary.

The other inconsistency is that Mark Cousins says in his article that ugliness can't survive intimacy. Basically, once you get to know something in time, it's no longer ugly. You seem to be arguing something different, that this is a building that's become increasingly ugly over time through intimacy. It's a really extraordinary reading I think, and I'm not quite sure what ugliness has to do with it.

TH: I'm not going to be able to parse all of those questions, but I'll try some of them. I think that first of all the distinction from Mark is a key. Mark's piece on ugliness really precipitated a lot of the thinking, but when he changes focus purely to subjectivity, to a question of the psychology of the experience of ugliness, that's an aspect of ugliness, but it's not for me the whole thing. He's still setting it up from the perspective of singular subjectivity and a particular experience, which is why he doesn't go into affect and can't really reach that as much. I think he's talking about an emotion of ugliness and not an affect of ugliness.

For me, that's a different kind of space. Maybe it's that space between his argument and mine that changes the way we think of intimacy. I think intimacy is not something that necessarily dissolves ugliness because I'm not thinking of intimacy as the production of a single subjectivity. Maybe that's where the distinction emerges.

For the other half of the question, for me this is a project of history. To make the distinction between Bob and me, I'm an historian and Bob is a theorist, as a starting point. What I mean by that is that I started this as a way to try and describe and work on Brutalism, to think of it over a larger span. It is really a descriptive project and an historical project about Brutalism, and ugliness serves as a concept for actually understanding Brutalism as producing meaning over time, or as possibly a form of architecture that only accumulates meanings that have been deferred or continue to be deferred. All that as opposed to recuperating Brutalism as a project of authorship and of tension, which the current writing on Brutalism is too much for my taste about presenting Brutalism as this moment of authenticity and the presentation of a kind of sincere thing. That's why it doesn't amount to or doesn't sound like a critical posture that's portable. For me it's tied up with an historical work on Brutalism.

JK: It seems to me that what you had was absolutely brilliant, because it's a recuperation of the lost possibility of a lost affirmative critical idea. Once you've done this, you can go back and look at architecture's failure to irritate, and make judgments. Whether you're doing this as a history of Brutalism or not, I think that was an original contribution to the discussion of criticism in a really profound way. It's much more interesting to me, or much more effective as a tool for me as a critic than whether I read that through the discussion of ugliness. I think your job as an historian is essentially to do a kind of careful revision of how we think of some history, but out of that should come interesting things. Certainly in berating your panel I've become an unbelievable irritant.
Adaptations: The Architectural Project in the Age of Postproduction

Basically, what I'm going to show you and give you insight into is something that's almost my subconscious. This is me trying to work stuff out. I'm going to use shorthand, and I'm going to pontificate and assert, but it's basically a way to get through some stuff that I want to spend more time doing.

In the last few years, the critics in American architectural discourse—the ones I follow out of respect and habit—have generally stayed away from pointing fingers and naming names, or for that matter really clarifying, what might be at stake in the field for the young generation of architects that emerged on the scene during the last few years or, if you make it eight, the entire Bush era. The times were bad enough: Bush number two was in the White House, the country in two wars, but in retrospect the situation was downright cushy when it came to the day-to-day survival of architectural offices and the commissions to feed them; the rigged economy thankfully required many architectural services. Architects were encouraged to just go for it, make the best of their commissions as they came, worry less and say yes. They were asked to work as double agents who might find ways of slipping in some resistance to the status quo, or at least a way to advocate for outcomes they think necessary, while simultaneously taking care of their commissions. Certain theorists even had a sense that something like a new form of emancipatory project would appear sooner or later, even if in an unimaginable and yet unrecognizable form. But what if it does not? Or, conversely, what if critics are not looking closely enough to recognize it?

For some young American architects, just as for some critics, the collapse of the market may have produced internal dialogues that in many ways resemble the Greenspan congressional testimony in October of last year. And even if it instigated deep introspection, the collapse of the market itself will not help us decide for sure what was at stake for the young generation of American architects over the last eight years or might be in the future, while it might in fact wipe out some of them. All this is to say that this is a rather rough and problematic first attempt at getting closer to issues, or a way of identifying issues, to which and through which the new work speaks.

In 2003, Bruno Latour invited his readers to take a mental test: if we thought that indeed a time would come that we would be able to distinguish ends from means, facts from values, humans from non-humans, trusting that clarity was merely a question of progress, we could still consider ourselves modern. If we hesitated at all with this problem, Latour called us postmodern. If, on the other hand, we believe the world is getting ever-more entangled, we might have entered another paradigm, one that Latour insists on calling non-modern. In my opinion, we don't need to give up the fact that modernism, or postmodernism for that matter—as a period with a specific ethos, concept of time, and a specific idea of progress—actually occurred and produced results, in order to accept the idea that we are now able to see and describe complex relationships between various agents, objects, histories and processes.

A type of periodization is important here to complement Latour's experiment. Even if we lack a convenient name for the contemporary, terms such as Marc Auge's supermodernity, Hans Ibelsing's supermod-
ernism, Zigmund Bauman’s fluid modernity, or even Latour’s own non-modernity, have all resulted from a description of an important difference between the contemporary and the modern as understood historically. If modernism can be seen, following Bauman’s description of solid modernity, as having operated with the idea that progress and the era of time would eventually deliver things to perfection or to a perfectly rationally organized world, in distinction to modernism, the general consensus is that today we can no longer tap into the authority and certainty of that project. But for a generation of architects and clients who grew up with sampling, networks fully internalized, lisp protocols, knowing about the genome, contributing and learning from Wikipedia, donating money to and SMSing with the Obama campaign, having a set of external authoritative truths is not a precondition for action. Still, in order to intervene consciously or even semi-consciously in the world, as architects ultimately do, requires the production of personal and/or collective narratives that in some way mediate between the circumstances exterior to any given project and the design process itself.

These narratives function as positioning devices postulating the role of the architect and of the discipline of architecture in a complexly entangled world. Our world. Legitimating narratives are part of the history of architecture, both as entire authoritative discourses (on style, origins, social responsibility) or disciplinary projects (autonomy, New Brutalism, neorationalism) and as individual architects’ interpretations of those discourses. What distinguishes our most recent versions of legitimating narratives from all earlier versions in architectural history— as some of you have already mentioned—is that narratives of architectural production are now more fluid, more personal, often multiple, generally ideologically modest, and that they are often adaptations of parts or a number of earlier stories. All legitimating narratives that we might be able to reconstruct, from ’68 or earlier, until recently, could be organized in three groups, three fundamentally different genres or postures: narratives of activism, narratives of new beginnings, and narratives of optimization.

Narratives of activism rely on the most direct form of participating in politics. Projects in this genre use aspects of the architectural medium in order to reach the citizen in their audience. They have agitational aspirations and a less immediate concern for building. I’m just going to give you a few historical examples for each of these narratives just to sort of hold it in your head, more or less the way I think young architects these days hold them in their head as a kind of mythical background. So for narratives of activism we have Ant Farm, or, for example, Diller + Scolfio.

Narratives of new beginnings may sound like proposals of utopian worlds—and certain utopias may fit here as well—as these narratives are actually simulations of architectural desert islands. What would you take with you in order to make architecture in the condition of a desert island or in isolation? What are the minimum ingredients an architect needs, or wants, in order to make architecture? A number of different takes on autonomy fall into this bracket, although autonomy does not map perfectly onto this genre alone. At stake here is the transforma-
tion of the definition of the disciplinary core, different mythologies of the architectural origins and the possibility to rearticulate or re-imagine the contemporary subject of architecture from scratch.

Finally, we have narratives of optimization. Although the ultimate effect of work in this genre is a kind of optimization of circumstances, more important than the idea of optimizing here is the fact that the ideological role of architecture here is conceived in relationship to an assessment of the world that architecture is seen as a part of. Projects in this vein accept constraints from the world and work within those. We often find examples in this genre of a kind of delirium of trying to explain the world.

In order to begin the work of discerning, as the panel suggests, exactly what we should hold this generation of architects accountable for, I will look at the work of three firms, each very loosely fitting within each of the three narratives. They fit loosely because contemporary narratives are adaptations, they’re not clearly adhering to these narratives anymore.

The urban design firm from Brooklyn, Interboro Partners, acts as the new activists. By choice and by inheritance, WorkAC is a firm that emphasizes its interest in the real world; its pragmatism places it within this narrative of optimization. There could be many projects within these narratives, as well as within new beginnings, but few are as compelling as MOS, and Michael Meredith’s studio at Harvard last fall linked the notion of the desert island to the temporality of the historical avant-garde, asking students explicitly to simulate new beginnings. This is partly where the name comes from for me. A part of his blurb to his students said, “What is it that we can be naively optimistic about today? Advanced architecture simply claims that if you are clever, given the appropriate sources, technologies and methods, the right compromises can be made. How unsatisfying. Therefore we’re faced with a twofold question: whether revolution is still possible, and if so, what will it look like? In other words, what will we take with us to our desert island?”

Now to show you the firms. Interboro, in their Dead Malls competition entry, a competition organized by the LA Forum in 2003—a project that started the public career of the partnership of several Harvard graduates—articulates the role of the architect as that of the ghostwriter for a series of constituents, individuals, and other more abstract entities that have interest in this mall. Basically, they look at the mall and say that it is generally understood as dead, but there are cultures around it that seem to be still living and using the mall, and we’re going to advocate for those cultures whether they be a snake suck, a pickle guy or so forth.

In another project by Interboro, one for lots in Detroit, they similarly ghostwrite for basically the entire neighborhood a story about what one could do here or what is already happening, processes they might in some way want to continue, instigate or help. They always start with a personal narrative and come back with material for the neighborhood, so dissemination and personal contact are part of their project.

To their own desert island, MOS brings parametric design, two strong and consistent formal researches or obsessions (one is a stack or a funky stack, and the other a horizontal tubular volume), and much more. In fact, upon inspection, their list of concerns includes everything. This is what they’ll say—I’m using architects’ own texts here because part of what I’m trying to do is trying to discern between their work and their texts what kind of narrative they’re constructing for themselves, how are they legitimating their work—

Through our work we engage architecture as an open system of interrelated issues, ranging from architectural typology, digital methodology, sustainability, structure, fabrication, materiality, tactility and use, as well as larger networks of social, cultural and environmental. This process of participation and radical inclusion allows MOS to operate producing and inflecting environments at a multiplicity of scales.

Everything, of course, would be useful to have on a desert island, but it calls into question that initial premise of self-constraining.

WorkAC, in a similar type of text, says that they are “shaping ideas, inspired by difference and applying research, programmatic expansion, a surrealist’s eye,” et cetera. "They embrace humor, their work strives to make one plus one equal three,” and so forth. The statement they make follows the rhetorical rules of the genre, it tells us that WorkAC is pragmatic, oriented towards the world and therefore the constraints for the practice come from the world; they have tools to resist taking themselves seriously. The goal seems to be adding value to public life. Finally, the mode of engagement is a network team. Not one of their statements transcends the collection of statements, so even when they claim to be producing alternative universes, the posture of that utterance suggests that universe-making is a modest and perfectly reasonable goal.

But perhaps even more importantly, it is the plurality of those alternatives that make the proposal seem modest; there are many options, and many routes to those options. This evidence of uncertainty in some way automatically exposes the entire statement as a logistical blueprint for the practice and not an ideological one in terms of particular content or politics of the worlds they are committed to producing. Simultaneously, in the production of this blueprint—a kind of ingredient list for a recipe, not a recipe itself—is articulated a kind of contemporary version of the role of the architect. It is expressed as a series, not as a constellation of logically interconnected or conditionally related elements. Therefore, a number of different mixtures of humor, public gain and historically grounded disciplinary research, as they say, should be possible and produced in WorkAC’s work. In the end, the particular mixture of these ingredients is only partly determined by the world, as it is precisely the flavor of any given mixture that is tactically determined by the team of architects,
but we never quite know to what end.

In order to really try to decipher how they work, or in order to constrain what I have, I wanted to ask these firms three questions: (1) How do they understand the architectural object, or what is the idea of the architectural object and its performance in their narrative? (2) What is the historical or temporal imagination that they employ? (3) Is there a trick that might come out that might be theirs alone in this process?

Interboro, in no other project than the Dead Malls competition entry, more clearly explains that they’re interested in advocating for agents and entities of all sorts simultaneously. These agents all share the mall as a concern, the mall constitutes them as a public in a way, and Interboro sees their role as that of observing this situation through an oligopticon, an all-encompassing lens that will allow them to describe the relationships between agents, agencies and architecture more thickly. If this oligopticon smears a little bit of righteousness, you would not be wrong. This firm revels self-assuredly in bottom-up visioneering or envisioning.

For MOS, it is their radically inclusive, multivalent object of architecture that performs connections relationally. Its aesthetic qualities are actually at stake here. Almost every single object they make—whether of the stack or tube variety or something in between that their Ordos project represents, or their stools or their shades—has been carefully crafted into an elusive, precisely indeterminate form, as Mark Goulthorpe might call it. There is even an acceptance or an embrace of an image of material failure which involves or produces an uncertainty in the audience. Maybe it’s a kind of irritant.

They will claim that what interests them about the parametric project is exactly what it exceeds: the sociopolitical dimension of architecture. "Parametrics’ potential is to produce a hyper-inclusive set of parameters and relationships. The more multivalent the object, the more meaningful and complex it is. The more multivalent the object, the more engaged it is in culture, market and the more elusive it is to being absorbed by it." This claim of course is subject to clarification. What interests me more than whether it is true or not—because we’re dealing with a legitimating narrative here—is that parametric production in general, and their formal research, are understood by MOS as directly participating in producing sociopolitical relationships.

Both MOS and Interboro—in entirely different ways—are interested in a type of a relational object, a “quasi object.” For me, still the most important description of what that is comes from the definer of the quasi-object Michel Serres, who asks us to conjure up an image of the soccer game in which the soccer ball is that kind of a quasi-object. It doesn’t really exist as an object unless it is being played by the team. It is in fact, that the team shares a set of concerns about scoring and relaying the ball that the ball somehow produces the team around it.

In that sense, both the architectural object in both Interboro and MOS is asked to produce that kind of a set of relationships between people who participate in the production of the thing, but also between those who are receiving it aesthetically.

The concept of time in each of these projects is in large part what defines their, or for that matter my, ability to put them in any particular place in the matrix. The temporal element determines the genre of the narrative to a large extent. Interboro’s activism is projective. It sets out to accomplish things for the future, and it is relatively straightforward in that sense. It always starts with a narrative of the present.

The new beginning narrative operates on an avant-garde time, a deliberate turning back to an era, but in MOS’ case, this happens with a twist, provided by notions like a “Prehistoric Future”—which is what they called their middle PSI scheme—and an appeal to an archaic shape or form in “After Party.” For me, this suggests a slightly different way of being in time. It’s not just that they are standing with their backs to an era trying to upstage it, it is more like “project time,” something that Slavoj Zizek talks about in his In Defense of Lost Causes.

One stands in a kind of history of the future in order to make that future happen. For example, the way that Zizek would explain both the arrival of communism and its fall is that there was the idea that there is a crisis coming for sure, and we are in its past. We have to act in its past in order to stop it in its future.

In WorkAC’s case, the temporal aspect of their intellectual project changes from project to project in a way. The shuffle of historical references or the attitude towards
history as a repository of architectural knowledge is nowhere more evident than in the "Prgram Primer" that WorkAC produced for Praxis. It places side-by-side examples from their own work, from the annals of architectural history, next to their friends and their mentor. The particular context and content of each of the projects they look at is eliminated. We have a kind of synchronal collapse of the archive.

What I think has to strike one when looking at the Beirut project produced by WorkAC for the Rotterdam Biennale in 2007 is that the delirium of saccharine and cute colors of the model, and the super-saturated atmospherics of the renderings disguise a dark and twisted conceptual project on the interior. They are basically saying, "We're going to accept the fate of Beirut as a war zone, and give you a series of epochs that it could go through." These are the tent city, urban war coliseum, metro, bunker archaeology, cedar evolution and then iconic programs. This sci-fi history of a tortured city does not visually conjure up the parallel that I'm going to make, fairly obviously, to The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture. Nothing about the architectural elements in the two projects can be compared, but the narrative structure, the use of the present tense in both, and the effect of outrageousness are important in both projects. The allotments in Koolhaas are spatial, while the epochs in the Beirut project are temporal.

Whether specifically articulated by Work or not, the split between, or perhaps the forcing together, of the happy graphic and desperate story point to a crack in the constructed veneer of innocence. The program for the project meanders through a series of architectural headings, from primitive tents to bunker archaeology to tourism, and to the iconic programs or buildings that will look like anything from Gehry to Koolhaas, WorkAC to Juren Mayer. The story that they tell is tough and silly simultaneously, a real mash-up, a kind of "Girl Talk architecture" that resolves in the candy colored masterplan.

However earnest projects like Public Farm 1 or the Ordes House may seem, once it is plausible that WorkAC's innocence is faint—that it is their best-kept secret that they protect in every interview they give, one that they might not even know that they're protecting—it is easy to see PFI as an earnestly presented joke, and the Ordes House as a house for collective living, because they're not taking it as lightly as they want us to take it. They are preparing it for a context of several families living in it even though they will not at any point critique the commission. PFI certainly plays with the reference to a particular New York City type of nostalgia for one's own private tomato garden, and when employed as a roof and a shape for PFI it may indeed serve to somehow brand the idea of an ecological urbanism that they otherwise talk about, however far from the ecological urbanism that they're talking about this earth-filled cardboard box may be.

The fact that the temporal structure or the temporal thrust of WorkAC's projects can change as dramatically as it does, from a retail store for here and now to a radical synchronal mixture of history, to utopia, and back to cartoony projection, signals the extent to which the historical time itself is amiss in this work. We don't get a standard time frame like we might otherwise get in this lineage of pragmatism. We get something much weirder than that.

When it comes to the tricks that these firms employ, Interboro employs what they call ghostwriting and they do that knowingly, but in addition, not an innocence but an acceptance of their bottom-up approach as inevitable for them. When we look at MOS, there is an uncertainty that they embrace and channel into the very shape of the work. In may be a kind of constructed uncertainty that they're interested in, but it is certainly one of the tricks that allows them to do the work that they're doing. In the case of WorkAC, they may want us to think it is humor that helps them do work, but actually a kind of faint innocence is much more what is at work here.

So what do we do with all of this? I don't yet know really, but I think that scratching the surface a bit more deeply and in a more organized way than I just did for you today might a generational set of concerns beneath their anxiety to articulate projects. In that sense they might stop looking like zombies, even though they might look like very different people who participate in a kind of generation of young architects.
Panel Discussion: Discernment

John McMorrough (JM): I want to make my apologies to my fellow moderators. I think I gave you a difficult task in synthesizing material that was interesting in its own quality, but clearly wasn’t thematically related. I’ve now afforded myself the opportunity to have challenging presentations that are utterly entwined, so good for me.

That said, we could really just have a conversation about this material. In a way, I was intrigued by the parallels in the first two presentations. They’re making different sorts of claims, but both of them seemed to be dealing somehow with the specter of environmentalism, in the widest sense of the term. What struck me in both cases today was the sense of real skepticism about any sort of hint of instrumentality. In Penelope’s case, she was talking about green agendas, and architecture’s disciplinarity giving over different sorts of traits, looking at a set of practices that come back with a rereading of material to get new insight into recent work. I’d say it’s concerned with the image, and the imageability of nature as an adequate and appropriate vehicle for architectural exploration. And Ariane, in your case, I think it’s a similar sort of operation, but it’s not so much about environmentalism, instead a sort of pushing of science and scientific method. You could refer to it as objectivity. It’s almost an aesthetics of objectivity.

What I’m intrigued with in both cases is, given the situation of the work, that in both cases there’s a sort of skepticism of the instrumental and an investment in the representation. Is that a fair identification, or am I missing the nuance of the descriptions?

Penelope Dean (PD): First of all, I would say that the Ito project is not interesting in image first. It’s actually a really technical project about the recycling of water, but it’s done in an interesting way that produces a good image, and I think a very beautiful project. For sure it’s the case with Atelier Bow Wow and the extruded leaves, that’s definitely operating in the realm of image.

To get back to the first point of your question about skepticism, yes, I’m really skeptical. I should have sort of prefaced this by saying that I’m operating in Chicago now, where it’s epidemic. Every single discussion is about how to turn Chicago into a green city, “We have to have green roofs, we have to do this, and this,” et cetera. It’s gotten so bad that architecture has just been reduced to a kind of techno-specialization where technology is simply slapped on the sides of buildings. My position is that that way of dealing with technology is inadequate. So yes, I’m really skeptical of that project.

The projects that I included were just ones that I saw as rewriting the green trajectory. I think we need to simply open up the possibilities. That’s not to preclude the technological project; I actually think that if you went back to [Reyners] Banham’s Well-Tempered Environment, what we have to do is to reclaim that territory. No one has reclaimed that territory the way he wanted. Maybe the projects that Ariane brought are attempts to do that. I think what happened is that project became a High Tech one through the British scene and Ken Yeang, who though operating in Malaysia is British educated, and then it kind of appears in people like [William] McDonough here.
Ariane Lourie Harrison (ALH): I think bringing up Banham’s Well-Tempered Environment is really a perfect jumping off point because I think he is trying to ask why do things that work have no look? Where is the look? What’s the problem here? I think that when Ana was framing them in the guise of activism, that in some sense dispenses with the responsibility to have a look. I’m really interested in the question, can things really have no look, and what about that look of technology that thinks it is absorbed of a look, yet there are many moments where there are potentials for an aesthetic. A firm like The Living pretty much denies that responsibility I think.

Ana Mijacki (AM): Don’t you think that their look is the lack of look?

ALH: I think that’s fascinating and important. It’s important to be able to read them in a certain continuum, to not say that no, these are just another set of technical experts, à la the ones that Banham makes reference to.

JM: That’s interesting, and I think it brings me to Ana. I was utterly fascinated by the taxonomy, I think it works very well and is very illuminating for my own work and for the discussion at hand. I was curious that as you went through and gave us the tricks, and the time and so on I noticed that at a certain point it was really a study of rhetoric as opposed to a study of form or of instrumentality. You were very pointed in calling them legitimizations. It’s clearly important work, but I’m curious how you see legitimacy as a representation of the architect, and why you feel that at this juncture that work is the work of criticism as opposed to dealing with the forms. You spoke to the forms to a degree, but really only as the scaffolds of the rhetoric.

AM: For me, the important thing right now is to figure out what is it they tell themselves at their desk when they make this stuff. I do think that some of that text or rhetoric is not actually always articulated. It’s sometimes in the form itself, but you only got a little bit of that. I’m trying to figure out if there’s a way we can actually put them against each other, and are there going to be certain things that emerge if we let what they’re saying turn into a kind of story about the project. Generally, when asked a straight question, this entire generation says they have no project, they’re just doing stuff. In a way, I’m trying to see what’s actually behind that kind of anxiety to articulate. They’re still articulating it, just not when you ask them.

ALH: But is it necessarily an anxiety or could it be a strategy, that they prefer not to discuss their project? Do you have to be that overt in discussing it? I’m referring to the example of The Living, who have an overt ecological project which I feel they manage to subvert in certain ways. If you would ask them about speaking to fish I’m not sure how they would answer that question. Do you have to be straightforward, or can you prefer not to respond?

AM: Yes, you can, but for me there’s something at stake here. There’s a generation that has actually produced a different way of legitimating what they do, to themselves, whether they say it or not. Those narratives are not the three that I gave, I used those to bracket them. But they’re actually doing something else. What I’m hoping is that by looking at a series of things in those narratives—because they already accept something about the cliché—by looking more closely, we might find that actually they’re all trying to talk about some kind of relational aesthetic, but they’re not all going to say it. When it comes to the things that matter to them, they’re scared of actually articulating it.

PD: I wonder if it’s simply a deferral of expertise. I’m done with ACSA Conferences, but I was at the regional one in November for the Midwest on digital stuff, I was asked to moderate something. There were three guys, boys, showing images of CNC routed toolpaths moving, and very beautiful objects they were making. Then when you asked a question about that work there’s a kind of hands-off approach, like “Whoa, that’s not my job to explain what I do.” I do think that there’s what’s best described as a deferral of expertise, or not wanting to be accountable for the work.

JM: That deferral of expertise is quite interesting in the terms of this conference because the question becomes whose expertise? What is that purview? In your approach, Ana, you’re trying to force them to explicate something that is either overtly hidden by strategy or also, I think, unsayable because they don’t construct the problem that way. I wonder if this is the intellectual division of labor where the role of criticism is to help articulate larger fields. It’s interesting that you’ve talked about the work of these three groups, who for me are somewhat formed or forming along their way. It seems like your constituency really isn’t these architects, but students and the way they start to understand the nature of the culture.

From my understanding, groups like these have been utterly formed by a theoretical discourse simply through their teachers living through it. It’s been ingrained. Now this group becomes the teachers, and there seems to be no ideology in terms of the pedagogy. Then it becomes an issue.

AM: For me, the interest in this comes from the pedagogical side of my life. That’s definitely true, but I also think criticism, really specific criticism, has not been happening for
these architects. I'm not saying that this little thing would actually be useful for them, but I think somebody has to be there to say, "Look, are you kidding me?"

**JM:** This brings up the subtext of the conference, because we're all of basically the same age, we've all graduated from doctoral programs in the last couple of years. For me, one of the questions is that, though this conference is purportedly about criticism, it's really about what the nature of intellectual production is for people trained to think about architecture. It's manifested in different ways today, some more overtly historical, some theoretical, some sort of critical in a way. When you talk about how somebody needs to come forward, I don't think it's a person, I'm wondering if it's a position. Is there a subject position, the critic, as something that takes on certain roles. Now there's a certain pregnancy to that question because there are generations whose mode of operation don't imply process, don't imply method, don't imply dogma in the same way in terms of their iterability or at least their speaking about it in a forthright manner. That might create this division of labor model. Is this something interesting or is it something to be avoided?

The previous generation constructed their intellectual project about precisely not doing that thing, and that's the precipice I see us approaching. We're also formed by a previous generation that had certain sorts of theoretical conceits, one of them having to do with a lack of operativity, and also the notion of theory in terms of making design propositions. I think in some ways some of us in this panel especially are starting to navigate that terrain. For me this is a moment of calling attention to that fact that we are precisely doing all those things that the generation before and the generation before that were told, "Do not do this thing." I just want to bring attention to that moment.

**PD:** But I do think the role of the critic is to reel things back into the discipline. In a way, we need to point out directions and have positions. It's those positions which are going to enable you to choose this project versus that project, what's in, what's out, is it good is it bad. Otherwise we're operating a little bit in a vacuum.

**ALH:** But when we mean to bring things in relation to the discipline, we are also remaking the discipline constantly, and I think that's where some of the very interesting work of the seventies happened. There were moments of active suppression. I don't know very much about the Utopie situation, but it's very interesting to have an avant-garde actively suppress another in repeated instances. Maybe that is also where some of the more historical work begins to elaborate the discipline and to also—and I think this is critical—is to elaborate the discipline as other than a conversation between archi-
tects, to really look at these conversations, these strategies of working with institutions. My interest was in how a certain type of corporation maneuvers, but there is a tremendous amount of work to be done in legal frameworks, financial frameworks, et cetera to keep expanding the discipline as critics bring work back into relationship with it.

R.E. Somol (RS): Since Jeff [Kipnis] is gone, I'll take his normal place and provoke. There is a generational jest that you've taunted us with, that somehow the generation before you wasn't able to do things that you are now able to do. What is the unable, and what is the able, particularly in relation to Jeff's question about history, theory and criticism? As you said, everyone here is the product of a Ph.D program, and Ph.D programs are very good at teaching history and theory, but not so good at teaching criticism. So how do you overcome your own baggage, in terms of a Ph.D, in order to do criticism? And have you overcome the baggage of history and theory in order to do criticism?

JM: I think that's a good point. I was struck by just how many of the presentations had a kind of underlying formula: a rereading of the sixties and seventies, then a jump into the current moment as a recurrence and how to deal with that legacy or transpose it. Whether it's environmentalism, the megalast structure, brutalism, et cetera. That's not causal, but I think it's interesting that we're in this moment of recurrence for lots of factors. Cyclical history, economic crisis, all of these situations where we're going to face these things again.

I'd like to expand things a little bit. I'm not going to convene the whole table, but to open it up to the floor and also to the other participants to make comments about these presentations but also the presentations throughout the day if there's any dying need for a summary comment or observation.

JM: You convene a conference in the hinterlands, invite your closest friends, force your students to come, and try to work it out...

I think it's a perfectly valid question, and I don't think everybody's on the same line of that issue.

RS: How are you not the anti-shop guys, which is another form of specialization, and so in some sense, a bit less than the generation of amateurs that we see in the field right now? As in those who only care about what it is and not its significance, versus others who might care about its significance but not what it looks like. Is there a mirror inadequacy in expertise and specialization, the illness for which criticism is the cure?

Lucia Allais (LA): I disagree. I don't care much for the generational question. I think if this is the conference, the three panels were: criticism as informed by description, criticism as informed by discrimination and criticism as informed by discernment. But if you actually pay attention, we really tossed the models so that our panel was very discerning, about making judgments about what's worthwhile writing, and the second panel was actually very descriptive, they spent like a whole hour on one building. I don't know how the last panel fits in that, but it seems like discernment is revealing what was hidden, actually they described what was obvious, but just in really scientific terms.

So I'm thinking that a criticism of what's happened today is that we've made more leeway for criticism. Criticism hasn't disappeared at all, on the contrary. For me it's pure opportunity, not repression.

JM: I will say one thing though about the generational construct, that it's used with some light irony as an inherited form of talking about the passage of time and years. I would also adamantly say that the positioning, especially at this juncture, isn't the fact that there was a previous generation that was somehow inadequate and unable and now we're the historical fulfillment. It's not a progressive model, but simply a kind of reconstruction of the field.

PD: Bob, you know the answer to that question. You would say that it's the death of the architect-critic as a hybrid figure. Now let's say we actually have a polarization of designer and critic, which would be a form of deferral of expertise. The question is how to move forward. Do we need to reinstall the architect-critic, or is there another kind of figure or another kind of model to enable us to operate in the field of criticism differently? I don't know the answer to that, it's just a speculation.

JM: I suppose on that note we'll conclude. I want to thank all the participants first of all. It was fantastic to hear the breadth and depth of the work being done. I personally got a lot out of this exchange and I look forward to more. I'm inspired to go start writing again, and that's a good sign.

Timothy Hyde: So it worked.

JM: It worked indeed.