

"How important is it that your students are critical, Mr. Kerez?"

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«How important is it that your students are critical, Mr. Kerez?»

«You address a question we have discussed quite intensely at the chair. I taught the first year students for 8 years, and during the 5th or 6th year I wondered, «What is the most strongly needed asset for an architectural student today?» We figured that it's exactly critical thinking. I do not believe that the students are not critical anymore, rather the pressure in the field of architecture has increased enormously over the last 10 to 20 years. There is really a change going on in the conditions of architecture that I observe with anxiety. There is in Swiss competitions today an enormous number of things that you have to prepare, to solve and to prove as an architect that did not even exist before.

I participated in two major international competitions: the Royal College of Art, in London, and the Beyeler Foundation in Basel. In both cases, both juries tried to prevent journalists from debating the result of the competitions or making a comparison between the projects. Architectural juries today are notoriously afraid of any debate, even if there are so many competitions actually that the public lost interest. Whereas it is actually only the debate that makes competitions in architecture interesting. Is a painting by Ad Reinhart better than a painting by Liechtenstein? Is a proposal by Sanaa better than a proposal by OMA? They have both different attitudes, different understandings of architecture and the difference between two proposals comes out of that. The jury has to find criteria to evaluate them and the public has to debate these criteria. In the last 10 years, there has been a total loss of critical debates on architecture together with a dramatic increase in architectural investments, the scale and in the political impact of the buildings. When I went to university, Martin Steinmann would describe competition entries from Jaques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron which were not even winning prizes. Still they were the most interesting projects that were discussed. Times were different, the debate in competition was actually more important than who won or lost them. I remember much better the [sensation] of the Parc de la Villette by OMA than the winning competition entry.

I think that we are witnessing the end of an era. It is time for a new generation to take over. In this sense, we were thinking: «how can we help the students to develop a critical understanding?», but I honestly wonder if it's really the professor's responsibility to ensure this. Because it's exactly what is not on the agenda of an authoritarian professor-student relationship; Can you imagine the teacher giving the grades and saying: «my dear students you were not critical enough, especially not towards me so you only get a low pass».

We are to a certain extent successfully helping the diploma students to develop a critical understanding. We have been cultivating a climate of debate with them for several years. As a teacher, my role is not to tell them: «please do this» or «I think this is bad because it's not classical or not modern» or «please do

refer more to the buildings of Luigi Caccia Dominioni». It is rather the meaning of the brief which is important to me. «What does it mean that this brief is selected for this context?», or «what does it mean that you now make such a proposal?» In practice, it becomes hard to ask all these basic questions. They are time consuming, difficult and possibly preventing you from winning because they do not put the jury in a comfortable position. In this sense, it is a freedom for them to think about the meaning or the story behind a given program. It helps the students to investigate what they will be doing later in their practice.»

«The model of the studio—the idea of having an experienced architect showing the way to younger students—has a very strong bias towards dogmatism. Could you say that you propose something different to avoid it and actually foster a critical culture?»

«As I have explained you earlier, I am not the master of the student; I do not tell him what to do. This means that they have to come up with ideas and proposals themselves. We insist on this demand especially with the diploma students. We differentiate between an authentic and personal idea and a convention, a generic scheme as you see often in competitions. This has nothing to do with personal or aesthetic preferences. It is hard work to find your own attitude, your personal approach towards architecture. It is very painful and stressful. A Lot of students do not appreciate to be taken out of their comfort zone and say that we do not know what we want from them, which we somehow also do out of conviction. If a student does not find an idea, for whatever reason, He will fail. I am critical in this sense. I do not only wish I could help the students become more critical I am also critical towards what they are doing. They have to convince me that what they present is really their own thought, their own understanding. In the end, It is the statement of a project that matters to me, no matter if this might be politically correct or not.

Next semester our chair will be doing something new. We will first work on the definition of space, its perception and understanding. With this knowledge, the students will enter Swiss competitions. It will not be about square meters, cost estimation, and all this non-architectural arguments. It will be about space, about architecture; whether or not you can still think about spaces in this very restricted area of Swiss competitions and at the same time do your work as an architect.»

This text is taken from the skype interview with Christian Kerez led the 9th of June 2017 by Vincent Bianchi and Yann Salzmann.