

Dialectics of the crit: from an oracular to a dialectical framework

Steven Flemming + Michael J. Ostwald
University of Newcastle

Theme: Theory + Praxis

Keywords:

Negotiation and integration

Abstract:

Throughout the last two decades the role of the architectural 'crit' as an educational tool has increasingly come under scrutiny. In such research, the crit has been portrayed as a forum for critical debate, dialectics or enculturation as much, if not more so, than as a site of design development and formative assessment. The present paper is focussed on the rhetoric, or language and associated logic structure, that underpins presentations of design in academia. The paper considers the relationship between two forms of presentation - the oracular and the dialectic - as they are employed in philosophical and architectural discourse. While architects' rhetoric can reflect individualistic and inconsistent theories, one aspect of their work is relatively universal and consistent. Buildings are designed in consultation. In design studios and crits, client meetings, public consultation forums, appeals tribunals, design review forums and over coffee fundamental planning and massing strategies are resolved during the course of verbal discussions. The act of talking about buildings may seem unremarkable, until, that is, we recognize design talk as a kind of philosophical inquiry, otherwise known as dialectic. Devised in ancient Greece as a rational alternative to oracular pronouncements, shown in action through Plato's middle and late dialogues, and since employed by philosophers including Hegel, Kant and Marx, dialectic is an established method of inquiry, particularly with regards to the kinds of ethical questions that building projects can pose. This thread of inquiry is developed in the paper with a particular focus on the presentation of design in an academic environment.

Dialectics of the crit: from an oracular to a dialectical framework

The past 30 years has seen the profession of architecture exposed to greater public scrutiny. This is reflected in the preamble to the UIA/UNESCO Charter for Architectural Education which states that architecture and the built environment 'are matters for public concern. That there is, consequently, public interest to ensure that architects are able to understand and give practical expression to the needs of individuals, groups and communities.'¹ Architects practicing in the twenty first century no longer possess the freedom that was enjoyed by the preceding generation of Modernist designers. Previously, structures including large buildings, mega power stations and telecommunications towers, were universally received as symbols of progress and Modernity. Media reports portrayed their designers and engineers as heroes, working in the public interest. The situation for young architects and engineers working in the twenty-first-century is markedly different. Their education must prepare them for hostile public forums and it must teach them how to prepare statements of environmental effects for sceptical readers. Neither is public hostility reserved for those who work for profit-orientated clients. Where designers of beach-front apartments might expect dissent, seemingly benign proposals for wind-farms have recently encountered bitter opposition as well.

Even though the public's right to object has been recognised in legislation since the 1970s², many architects and educators are yet to embrace the constructive aspects of a politicised route to planing consent. Older architects can be especially intolerant and, in their role as educators, they may foster obstinacy, encouraging student architects to 'stand up' to councils and to not 'sell-out' in the face of public opposition. In an age of doubt, observers may find the unwavering conviction exhibited by many late Modernist architects - be they young or old - to be almost unfathomable. Yes, their conviction can be understood in terms of the clear, though simplistic, epistemological foundations of functionalist design theory. Believing that form-follows-function, Modernists of the post-war era knew what to build. It was widely accepted that the optimal response to a set of clearly defined performance criteria, exploiting the latest technology, was the right building. Such certitude has been lost with the realisation of a major shortcoming with functionalist design theory, that, in reality, architects have no objective grounds on which to base many decisions effecting the exterior forms of their buildings. As Brent Brolin has argued, even Le Corbusier's prime example of a functionally determined form, that of the aeroplane, can actually function with any of a number of external shapes.³ Aeroplanes will fly whether or not their engines are at the front or rear, or whether their wings are above or below their fuselages. Function can determine an aeroplane's requisite parts, but not its form. How then could buildings, which have far more lenient performance criteria than aeroplanes, be designed solely according to functional considerations?

Now that functional necessity is no longer a valid argument, what authority can an architect appeal to, in order to justify a building's exterior form? This is architecture's dilemma. While it is now generally accepted

that a building's surfaces can be a matter of style, or even fashion, there is still an expectation that fundamental decisions regarding planning and massing be grounded on sober principles. This seems essential given the enormous impact buildings have on their users, the environment and society generally, as well as the financial commitment buildings demand of their patrons. But what are those principles? Despite numerous attempts by architects and theoreticians to formularise principles governing form, no recent theory of architecture has attained the status of an orthodoxy, or prevailing wisdom. Nothing appears to have restored the sense of conviction that functionalist design theory once offered. To make matters worse, architects themselves lack conviction about their own guiding principles. According to Paul-Alan Johnson, 'if quizzed, [architects] will say they do not discern a single, comprehensive notion central to their way of working'.⁴ More commonly, architects will selectively, and often seemingly randomly, adopt past architectural theories from other disciplines, on a project-by-project basis.⁵ Architects may employ ecological principles, or borrow from other fields (psychology and cosmology for example), or echo the words of past theorists from their own discipline (such as Vitruvius, Burke or Gilpin), but they rarely employ principles with consistency, and never employ them in unison. If, as Deleuze and Guattari provocatively suggest, theories are like ripples on a topographic surface, then the architectural theory pool has become decidedly choppy and uncertain.⁶ There is, however, at least one deep theoretical structure that appears to provide a common basis for generating architectural form.

Despite many architects' reluctance to engage in public debate, it can be argued that it is the dialectical process itself that, since the 1970s (or the end of the oracular period), provides architects' conviction to build. Whether they like it or not, architects' buildings are designed in consultation. Architects spend long hours discussing, justifying and negotiating planning and massing strategies. Such debates may occur in-house during design reviews or workshops, in public, before hostile community groups for example, or in meetings with stakeholders or public officials. Before a building receives planning consent, it will have been debated from every conceivable point of view. A system has evolved which closely resembles a method which philosophers call dialectic. Dialectic is a form of philosophical inquiry that brings together antithetical truths, not with the intension of showing one's superiority, but to reach more complete conclusions. The fruits of a dialectic process should resound with those on both sides of the original debate.

The dialectical method is central to Plato's middle and late dialogues. Hegel, Kant, Marx, Adorno and other seminal figures, have made dialectic the basis of their inquiries into certain kinds of ethical questions which cannot be tackled using pure logic or observation. The method was held in highest regard by neo-orthodox theologians, including Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth who, when holding opposite truths in tension, believed that '[t]heir reconciliation comes in an existential act generated after anxiety, tension, and crisis, and which the mind takes to be a leap of faith.'⁷ The body of literature on the dialectical method offers those involved in the design of major buildings, and the development consent process, a well

established theoretical framework through which to appreciate and define the role of debates in architectural production.

From the standpoint of contemporary architecture, it is interesting to note that the Greeks devised dialectics to circumvent their society's reliance on oracles. In a narrow sense the post-war era in Architecture can be thought of as an oracular period; a time when architects were not required to justify their proposals through debate, but were frequently allowed to present their designs as if they were a scientific outcome tempered through individual, and unchallenged, inspiration. Moreover, many Modernists developed an armoury of sententious maxims, intended to quell debate. Ironically, all that was required to dismantle their cartel was a corresponding set of disparaging maxims, provided by the likes of Tom Wolfe⁸ and Charles Jencks⁹.

In the dialectical era that has since unfolded, architects have been required to engage in debate with representatives of every conceivable point of view. While after a dialectical exchange an architect's point of view may ultimately prevail, it is likely to have been coloured or refined by its antithesis. Philosophers who have put their trust in dialectic have done so with a belief that the outcome of all this discussion is a logically consistent conclusion, worthy of their conviction. However, architects may be concerned that dialectics may do no more than compromise otherwise bold design proposals. Such concerns may be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the dialectical method and its origins. For Plato, the dialectical method was not employed in search of compromise solutions, but irrefutable answers to complex ethical conundrums. For example, *The Republic* asks how a just society should be governed, and arrives, through a dialectical process, at a most uncompromising solution.¹⁰ Other political systems, including democracy and oligarchy, are systematically dismissed. The only system of governance that survives the interrogation, is a form of benevolent dictatorship headed by philosopher kings. The proof for this system's validity is not that it has been observed to work elsewhere (for Plato was a staunch anti-empiricist), or that it accommodates the interests of all parties, but that a group of intelligent people, fiercely debating the point, could reach a consensus. Contrary to architects' fears that debate can dilute a vision, here the process led to a singularly forthright conception. Unfortunately, debate and consensus, on their own, do not guarantee dialectically satisfactory outcomes. In the case of architectural debates, consensus is commonly reached via spurious means. Powerful individuals can exert an inordinate influence over design studios or design review forums. Seductive presentations can gloss over the fundamental weaknesses of a design proposition. Time constraints can bring about a hasty consensus. It is therefore necessary to examine the exact nature of a dialectical debate, and consider how such debates could be played out within the forums concerning building projects.

Dialectic has its origins in Socrates' habit of scrutinising the common assumptions of his fellow Athenians, through the process of elenchus. A typical Socratic elenchus starts with a seemingly innocuous question.

For example, Socrates asks Polemarchus for a definition of doing right by others.¹¹ Polemarchus replies that every person should be given their due by, for example, having borrowed possessions returned to them. Following his usual pattern, Socrates then asks Polemarchus a series of questions designed to undermine his apparently sane answer. Should you return a weapon to somebody who has become homicidal? If not, should you only return things when doing so will benefit the other person? If so, should you do the same for your enemies? All these maddening questions are intended to prove the inadequacy of common responses to ethical questions.

Elenchus is an essential step in the dialectical process. It involves a rigorous and exhaustive critique of all assumptions. While many architects, and especially students of architecture, would claim that their design proposals are subjected to ample scrutiny of this kind already (by savvy clients, sardonic university tutors, antagonistic community leaders and the like), few could claim to have faced an opponent quite so ruthless as Socrates. If the dialectical process is to provide the basis of architects' conviction to build, then architects must be willing to engage in elenchus with the sharpest critics available. The tendency to resent or dismiss criticism should be resisted. Especially during conceptual and schematic design phases, as schemes undergo major iterations leading to development consent, architects should actively elicit and engage with hostile critics, be they town planners, clients, consultants, other stakeholders, or fellow architects. Since architects face hostile audiences in their working lives, and since hostile opposition is essential to the dialectical pathway towards conviction, it is worth considering the practice of elenchus within the crit sessions run by schools of architecture.

The following hypothetical example shows how elenchus might manifest itself within a crit session. A student explains at the beginning of a verbal presentation to a jury, that their proposal for a high density housing development incorporates rows of North facing slab blocks. The student argues that the slab blocks have been so arranged to maximize their exposure to North sun. The principle of elenchus requires at least one jury member to point out the following antithetical propositions. Deeper solar penetration would be achieved if the slab blocks faced East and West, as is the case with Le Corbusier's *Unite de habitation* in Marseilles. A Northern orientation may not take full account of local conditions, such as sea breezes, or views. Many occupants may only be at home outside of working hours, in which case midday sun would not enhance their lives to the degree that morning or afternoon sun might. North facing slab blocks would overshadow public spaces, making them less desirable places for midday use. Strong cases could be made for residential towers on the site, which do not have privacy and/or cross ventilation problems associated with access corridors, and which provide greater access to sunlight and views. None of these statements annul the students' argument for North facing slab blocks, but they do reveal the complexity of the problem in anticipation of a less simplistic architectural response, which reconciles antithetical propositions.

According to George Henderson and Jeremy Till, the ‘mysteries of the ‘jury’, ‘crit’, or ‘review’ have been enshrined in design education for over a century.¹² Despite growing financial pressure which may soon precludes this type of small group interaction at a tertiary level, the architectural crit is still a global phenomenon and, regardless of some regional variations, it possess the same strengths and weaknesses in most parts of the world. As an educational tool the crit has been widely disparaged as an elitist, racist and sexist performance that is more a rite-of-passage than a learning experience.¹³ Garry Steven’s directly attacks the crit as being a tool of enculturation; a device for elevating an architecture student not to being a good designer but to express modes of dress, speech and taste that are appropriate for a person aspiring to high levels of cultural capital.¹⁴ This argument is reflected in the common assumption that the architectural crit is more concerned with appearances than content. For example, one somewhat cynical text that advises architecture students on the crit notes that:

[y]our ability to convey your ideas to the audience is vital to the success of your work. When it comes to the effect you have on your audience, it has been suggested that 60 per cent is created by your physicality, 30 per cent by the tone of your voice and the remaining 10 per cent by what you actually say.¹⁵

Noting for the moment that the design, in this description at least, does not actually contribute at all, the suggestion is simply that the crit is about appearances. The same book warns, in an admittedly humorous and occasionally grimly accurate description, against visiting critics (‘more concerned with massaging their [own] ego’¹⁶), hostile academics (‘[m]y four year old son could do better’¹⁷) and sexist tutors (‘[y]ou would be better off selling dresses’¹⁸).

An unfortunate side affect of the growing dissatisfaction with the destructive power of the architectural crit has been a progressive softening of the tone and content of comments given to students. Many crits are now primarily a site of positive reinforcement of good points (not necessarily a bad thing in itself), but with no mention of the serious flaws in the work. Further legal and social pressures have reduced the emotional and psychological impact of the crit until it is fast losing its capacity to challenge students and prepare them for the often aggressive and destructive debates of the real world.

A suggestion of the present paper is that the crit may be improved, from an educational point of view as well as in its capacity to assist in life-long learning, if critics can employ elenchus to better affect. The application of elenchus in the crit would involve vigorous and methodical questioning of a students’ position (both their intellectual argument and the proposed design). Richard Robinson describes the use of elenchus as a ‘change from a destructive to a constructive’¹⁹ tone and method that developed between Plato’s early and middle dialogues. ‘The constructive tone of the middle and late dialogues entails the

subordination and partial disappearance of the negative elenchus in them. What is now required is a method for attaining positive doctrine, not for rejecting it.²⁰

Regrettably, elenchus relies on language, a fact that detractors of the crit have argued is innately problematic because it privileges students who speak the chosen language, in all of its tones, accents, intonations and nuances, in the manner in which the academics themselves do. However, this criticism assumes that academics only seek to create in their own image. The rapid rise of student-centred approaches to architectural education over the last thirty years (most notably including problem based learning and action learning) has begun to dispel this practice. Moreover, changing social expectations have undermined the 'teacher as master' paradigm in most venues and students' expectations have also changed to such an extent that for them, mimicking their lecturers is the last thing on their minds. The practice of elenchus is focussed on language, but not on the nuances of speech, rather on the logical and coherent content of an argument or proposition. Elenchus is constructive (in that it is not intended to belittle or demean its participants), but it does not shy away from identifying the flaws in a project or an argument. Given the reliance of the architectural profession in general, and the construction process in particular, on dialectic, the thoughtful and persistent application of elenchus to the crit may be worth investigating in greater detail.

¹ <http://www.uia-architectes.org/texte/england/Education/2Charte.htm>, Accessed 7.2.05

² For example, *The Planning and Assessment Act of 1976*, is explicit regarding the need to invite all objections.

³ Brent Brolin, *The Failure of Modern Architecture*, London: Studio Vista, 1976.

⁴ Paul-Alan Johnson, *The Theory of Architecture: Concepts, Themes and Practices*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994, p. 338.

⁵ See: Michael J. Ostwald, 'Architectural Theory Formation Through Appropriation,' *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol 4, No. 2 (1999): 52–70

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* [trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill], New York: Verso, 1994.

⁷ R. V. Schnucker, 'Neo-orthodoxy', in Walter E. Elwell ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984, p. 755.

⁸ Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, London: Picador, 1981.

⁹ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, London: Academy Editions, 1987.

¹⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd. edn. [revised], [trans. Desmond Lee], London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987.

¹¹ Plato, *The Republic* (331e-332c)

¹² George Henderson and Jeremy Till, 'Preface' in Charles Doidge, Rachel Sara, Rosie Parnell and Mark Parsons eds., *The Crit: An Architecture Student's Handbook*. Oxford: Architectural Press, 2000, p. vii.

¹³ Kathryn H. Anthony, *Design Juries on Trial - The Renaissance of the Design Studio*, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991.

¹⁴ Garry Stevens, *The Favoured Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*. Cambridge [Mass]: MIT Press, 1998.

¹⁵ Doidge et. al. *The Crit*. p.46.

¹⁶ Doidge et. al. *The Crit*. p. 82.

¹⁷ Doidge et. al. *The Crit*. p. 60

¹⁸ Doidge et. al. *The Crit*. p. 60

¹⁹ Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, London: Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 61.

²⁰ Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, p. 61.