Review Article:

The Practice of Critical Theory in Architectural Schools: Twenty First Century Transformation

ทฤษฎีวิพากษ์กับการเรียนการสอนสถาปัตยกรรม: การเปลี่ยนแปลงในศตวรรษที่ 21

Assistant Professor Tonkao Panin, Ph.D.
ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ดร. ต้นข้าว ปาณินท์

Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University
คณะสถาปัตยกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร

Abstract

Critical theory is an interdisciplinary way of thinking that tries to bridge the gap between architectural theory and practice. During the past thirty years, the gap between the academic world of studio studies and the academic world of history and theory studies has become increasingly difficult to bridge [1]. In other words, the space of inquiry between architectural production and advanced scholarship has increased [2]. The task of architectural institutions today is thus to bring architectural education back to the interdisciplinary equilibrium it was once familiar with. This paper reviews the frameworks of *critical theory*, which during the past ten years has begun to replace the conventional history/theory approach in North American and European schools as a vehicle to re-unite architectural theory and practice. The review focuses on a selection of different modes that *critical theory* is taught and practiced, as well as ideas and principles of *critical theory* that have become increasingly relevant in the discourse of architecture today. Priorities and preoccupations of *critical theory* may help unfold the inherent complexity and contradiction within the process of architectural creation. In architectural discourse, both theory and practice are reread repeatedly, reworked and represented in roles that are well outside the original. *Critical theory* thus represents both the pragmatic doctrine and the philosophical inquiry that partake in the potential of architectural design to draw from the past and the present towards the future.

บทคัดย่อ

Critical Theory หรือทฤษฎีวิพากษ์ เป็นระบบวิธีการคิดที่พยายามเชื่อมโยงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการศึกษาเชิงทฤษฎี และการศึกษาเชิงปฏิบัติในสาขาสถาปัตยกรรมซึ่งในช่วงสามสิบปีที่ผ่านมานี้ถูกแยกห่างออกจากกันอย่างเห็นได้ชัด จนทำให้ สาขาวิชาสถาปัตยกรรมถูกแบ่งเป็นสองแขนงของการปฏิบัติวิชาชีพและการศึกษาวิจัยเชิงประวัติศาสตร์-ทฤษฎีที่ยากจะเชื่อมโยง เข้าด้วยกัน ปัจจุบันสถาบันการศึกษาหลายแห่งจึงเริ่มที่จะพยายามดึงความสัมพันธ์ของทั้งสองส่วนเข้าหากันเพื่อให้เกิดระบบ

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วิธีคิดและกระบวนการสร้างงานที่สมบูรณ์ในหลาย ๆ ด้าน บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษากระบวนการคิดในแนว Critical Theory ซึ่งใน
ช่วงสิบปีที่ผ่านมาได้ถูกพัฒนาและเริ่มเข้ามาแทนที่ระบบการศึกษาเชิงประวัติศาสตร์-ทฤษฎีในรูปแบบเดิมและได้รับความ
สนใจแพร่หลายในทวีปอเมริกาเหนือและยุโรป โดยเน้นการศึกษาแนวความคิดและวิธีการหลัก ๆ 3 วิธีการที่ได้ถูกพัฒนา
และนำมาใช้ในระบบการเรียนการสอนสถาปัตยกรรมในปัจจุบัน ซึ่งแนวความคิดในเชิง Critical Theory นั้นมิได้ถูกนำมาใช้
ในการศึกษาเชิงวิจัยเท่านั้น แต่ได้ถูกนำมาผสมผสานกับการเรียนการสอนเชิงปฏิบัติด้วย ก่อให้เกิดแนวทางการศึกษาที่เน้น
การตั้งคำถามถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างที่มาของความคิด กระบวนการพัฒนาความคิด และกระบวนการสร้างผลผลิตทาง
สถาปัตยกรรมอย่างเป็นระบบและเป็นอันหนึ่งอันเดียวกัน Critical Theory จึงเป็นตัวแทนของทั้งหลักปฏิบัติเพื่อการดำรงอยู่
ในชีวิตประจำวันและการพัฒนาความคิดจากการตั้งคำถามเชิงปรัชญา เพื่อค้นหาแนวทางการพัฒนางานสถาปัตยกรรมที่
สามารถรองรับการเปลี่ยนแปลงในอนาคตทั้งในมิติของความคิดและการปฏิบัติ

Keywords (คำสำคัญ)

Architectural Theory   (การศึกษาเชิงปฏิบัติทางสถาปัตยกรรม)
Critical Theory (ทฤษฎีวิพากษ์ ปรัชญา)
School of Thoughts (แนวความคิดทางสถาปัตยกรรม)

1. Preamble

In the article *"Teaching Theory to Beginning Students,"* Robert Vickery noted that during the first half of the twentieth century, most architectural education suffered from a lack of training in theoretical inquiry. Many Bauhaus oriented schools in North America and Europe championed architecture as a practical and political art. While this approach has made architecture open, democratic and socially concerned, it has also created an attitude in which making and doing architecture become more important than inquiring and understanding what it is that is being done. Such approach implies a triumph of pragmatic doctrine over philosophical inquiry [3]. In other words, architectural education during the first half of the twentieth century has been immersed in an architectural discourse that simply de-emphasized theoretical know-why while underscored technological know-how.

However, in the past thirty years, architectural education in North America and Europe has shifted its emphasis and given priority to questioning again what architecture is, how it may be defined, how it is created, and what are its appropriate goals and aspirations [4]. As these questions are set as the basic premises of architectural education, it enables students to understand architecture as unique in itself with its own priorities and preoccupations. This explains why the last thirty years have seen tremendous changes in the discipline of architectural history and theory. As M. Arch. Programs in North America and Europe have multiplied, so have Ph.D. programs. Furthermore, publishing houses specializing in architecture and related disciplines have also blossomed, as the readership of art and architecture rapidly grows [5]. Number of theoretical publications went from scant to overwhelming. But as value has been placed more and more over architectural theory, it has also become increasingly autonomous.

In recent years, the field of architectural history/theory has been dominated by two prominent approaches, which are the history of theory and the theoretical interpretation of theory. While the first has generated a large number of ontological studies of theory, the second has given us various readings and re-readings of existing theories throughout history. At any rate, through both approaches, theory has become a field unto itself, gradually disengaged from architectural practice. The practice of architectural theory became more of a historical study or a compilation as well as interpretation of existing treatises instead of giving emphasis on the thinking process and the findings of new ideas. Thus the gap between the academic world of studio studies and the academic world of history and theory studies has become increasingly difficult to bridge [6]. In other words, the space of inquiry between architectural production and advanced scholarship has increased [7]. The task of architectural institutions today is thus to bring architectural education back to the interdisciplinary equilibrium it was once familiar with. During the past ten years, however, the notion of critical theory emerged as an alternative to both the historical and the interpretational approaches to architectural theory. It emphasizes on interdisciplinary and philosophical framework of thinking as well as the pragmatic framework of making. Instead of concentrating on what have been said and done in the past, critical theory is a question of how to do and understand things at the current situation.

2. What is Critical Theory?

The term critical theory, when consider in the socio-economic discourse, is often referred

to Marxist thought, the work of Frankfurt School, and in some cases the work of Sigmund Freud [8] as well as feminist theorists and philosophers. In architecture, although the notion of critical theory emerged closely linked to the Marxist and the Frankfurt School of thought which placed great emphasis on socio-economic issues rather than anthropological concerns, it has been variously developed and transformed.

During the past thirty years, architectural theory has often been understood as two modes of inquiry, either induction—the setting out of a thesis that was then proved or disproved, or deduction—the development of a specific principle from a broader set of information or data. Thus theory was taken to refer to writings by architects or theorists who describe a design method they have "proved" by examples over time [9]. Critical theories, however, are different from such modes of thinking for they do not seek to prove a hypothesis of test a theory, they are reflective and seek to challenge the way we do things rather than to simply comment upon it. Aiming to construct a creative and critical dialogue between practice and theory, critical theory does not see this relationship as one way or linear. In other words, it does not aim to apply theoretical insights to modes of practice, or exemplify practice by illustrations of theoretical positions. Rather, using critical theory as a framework in architectural schools, theoretical studies and studio practices are often merged by simply asking—how can one think rigorously and critically as well as provide creative and productive proposition? [10] When this approach is employed in architectural research, it also alters the more conventional history/theory route, which tends to identify a series of questions at the outset and then explore them within a certain time frame. Critical theory researches do not necessarily follow this route because questions only emerge once certain process of

making and design are already engaged with. Thus research questions become more design oriented rather than historical/theoretical.

Though mainly concerned with the question of making, critical theory has also been taught and practiced differently according to specific sets of goals and preoccupations in each school. This paper will review three major modes or methods that critical theory is being approached today: those of aesthetic, semantic and ideological preoccupations.

3. Three Modes of Critical Theory From Autonomy to Engagement

If architecture can be said to aim at orienting human existence then it is possible to argue that the function of critical theory is to orient architecture. Critical theory has been a matter of questioning about basic premises in architectural thought and practice, whether cultural, social, political, aesthetic or symbolic. Yet, it can be approached from various points of view. For example, one can assume and argue for architecture's autonomy; that its form and geometry can be understood in their own right, as testimony of a designer's intelligence or invention. Architecture is, then, approached as the subject matter of aesthetic delight not unlike the way we view paintings or appreciate music. On the other hand, one can disavow the supposed autonomy of form and discover behind a building's dimensions, geometry and overall appearance the influence of broader cultural conditions, whether technological, social, or economic, not unlike the way we view political arguments and choices. On this second account, architecture is not an autonomous discipline but one that is fully engaged in many aspects of culture. Between these two approaches, architecture can also be

considered as communicative, conveying various meaning inherent in its spatial and formal configuration as well as its interaction with human.

The three 'modes of thought' have influenced the practice of critical theory during the past ten years. Although other variations also exist, these three modes are among the most important ways of 'practicing critical theory,' showing us how architecture can be variously interpreted. The ideas and principles of these 'modes of thought' have been of increasing relevance to the concerns in architectural design today.

3.1 Mode I: Aesthetics of Space and Form

This mode of critical theory simply concerns with the way things are formed and appear. The pivotal architectural debate of the nineteenth century concerned the interplay of artistic symbolism with the new materials and constructional technology of industrial culture. As the twentieth century closed, similar questions reemerged as new materials and scientific analyses of living habits revolutionized building construction and appearance. While this has encouraged architectural production based on the characteristics of a public technological society, artistic theories also cultivated an aesthetic of private subjectivity. The result was the attempt to understand and order modern built culture through both technological rulings and the individual imagination. Central to the investigation of modern identity was the creation of spaces, forms, and surfaces of the buildings [11].

In general, modes of experience by which one comes to terms with reality can be distinguished as perceptual and conceptual cognition; the former is based mainly on visual experience, while the latter is arrived at through a process of abstraction, the conceptual ordering of perceptual data. If the intellect operates through the faculty of concepts, perception takes place in the realm

of visual imagination or ideas [12]. But unlike the nineteenth century approach that sometimes regarded the perceptual world as inferior to conceptual or abstract cognition, critical theory sees that bias toward conceptual thought could lead to the difficulty for anyone to develop the perceptual faculty. Thus this mode of critical theory seeks to coordinate the objective rules and the subjective imagination.

The methods of diagrammatic analysis and mapping that lead to the generation of architectural spaces and forms can be seen as a result of this effort. Analytical diagrams or maps, which can be originated from multidisciplinary issues, act as a pretext to conceptual framework that creates architectural forms. In other words, before any spaces and forms take shape, designers need to analyze existing sets of information before they transform them into their own set of concepts and tools. Among many design methods, one example of this approach can be found in an adoption of biological theories to generate rule-based aggregated forms which can be manipulated and transformed by the designer's conceptual framework. Through such process the link between objective data and subjective imagination is formed. This represents an argument in which architecture is described on a continuum between physicality and conceptuality, appearance and inner structure. Yet, this mode of thinking aims mainly at the generation of architectural spaces and forms. When architecture is addressed primarily through its perceptual and conceptual quality, it is seen an autonomous discipline revolving within its own internal affairs of designing, making and building.

3.2 Mode II: Semantic Meaning of Buildings

As the first mode of critical theory focuses on how the building is formed and appears, the second mode turns to its semantic quality.

Among its many facets, this mode of thinking can be characterized by its search for meaning. In other words the emphasis on the appearances was replaced by the search for the inner meaning of things. We may recognize what lies before our eyes as an object, but such object may suggest something beyond its appearance. In other words, an architectural or art form may carry within its externality an internal symbolic meaning that a trained eye can decipher. In order to discuss its meanings, art and architecture was inevitably related to other cultural discourses such as literature, anthropology and philosophy. More often than not, this approach partakes not only in the meaning of forms but also of actions. The meaning of drawings, models or buildings, for example, lies in their subject matters as much as in ways which they are represented. While figurative objects in architectural drawings convey stories, various methods that the drawings are made also convey the mentality in which the stories are portrayed. Both the objects and the methods can be seen as two interrelated systems of symbolism in architectural and artistic production.

With this mode of thinking, everything means something and nothing means nothing. Unlike the conventional semantic research that focused on the scholastic reading of meaning that usually requires knowledgeable interpretation, this mode of critical theory also leads to the semantic approach of environmental study. If artistic creation can be read through its figurative and methodic aspects, architecture and our environment are also communicative that only through a semantic study of environment we can discover the means of discoursing in our building. In other words, people are only aware most obscurely of the forces working in them, forces which are fed on memory and association [13]. Not similar to ways figurative paintings are read, but people feel rightly that those forces can only

propitiated and purged through objects which carry some reference to which they may respond in the very moment of perception. In other words, every moment of perception contains a whole personal and collective past, our body is the incarnation of that past; and with every moment of perception this past is reordered and revalued [14].

This search for meaning is thus translated into two interrelated levels of analysis, the first aiming at an understanding of inherent meaning each and every object convey, while the second sets goal to understand the larger structure of a place or built environment. Such thinking, when employed in architectural design studios, is often translated into the process of syntactic analysis of both the design object and the context. In order for any design objects to be developed, the kernel of their forms needs to go through analogical transformation based on the meaning they are to convey. Moreover, every object has to be read and re-read in relation to the structure of the place in which it is belonged. Architecture and built environment in this sense, is seen as a language with inherent syntax that may vary according to specific circumstances and goals. Examples of this mode of production lies not only in memorial designs, but also in other architectural constructs that see themselves as a part of a larger social and cultural context, including works of contemporary urban analysis. Instead of asking how things appear like in the first mode of critical theory, it asks why things appear the way they do, and what may result if things are organized differently.

If for the first mode of critical theory, human perception is the center of architectural experience, it is only located in the here-and-now moment that prevents such perception to be related to any meaning beyond its physical present. But for this second approach, human

perception does not begin and end in itself. Perception always contains a past in the present depth [15], allowing us to understand the meaning of all things.

3.3   Mode III: Ideologies, Culture and Politics

During the second half of the twentieth century, political stances as well as economic situations became the major issues that penetrated most educational discourses. Questions are; in a society that fundamentally changed, can architectural history/theory continue to derive its meaning from the same strategies as elaborated during the first half of the century, or should a new definition of architectural history be developed? As social and cultural preoccupations shifted and different questions were being asked, it became irrelevant to seek for meanings within the closed discipline of art and architecture. Thus architects and theorist were obliged to disavow the supposed autonomy of form and discover behind a building's dimensions, geometry and overall appearance the influence of broader cultural conditions, whether technological, social, or economic, not unlike the way we view political arguments and choices. Architecture was no longer an autonomous discipline but became one that was fully engaged in many aspects of culture.

This approach to theory and practice is rooted in two dominating schools of thoughts of the twentieth century. While it is closely linked to the Frankfurt School that pressed great emphasis on socio-economic issues, it is also related to the Venice School of thought which can be characterized by its highly critical attitude towards the production of architecture. Architecture thus responds to broader cultural issues outside its own aesthetic and semantic preoccupations.

While the semantic mode of critical theory tries to read the meaning of architectural production, this ideological mode is concerned with social, political, economic as well as intellectual contexts that would provide a broad understanding of the type of representation that shaped the entire era. In other words, it is not the representation itself that this mode of thinking is preoccupied with, but the context which produced such representation. Among the arts, architecture has a special position. Painting and sculptures, for example, are autonomous works of art that can be enjoyed in the isolated atmosphere of the museum. But such is not the case for architecture for it is only partially related to the world of artisans. Primarily it produces a technical and social product, as buildings perform a function within any given society. Thus for this mode of critical theory, architecture will always contain a tension between ethics and aesthetics. Architects may have to let go parts of their artistic and formal ambitions and focus on the possibilities offered by society.

This mode of thinking is often characterized by studio studies that press great emphasis on the subject matters and their transformation into built products. Such subject matters are often framed by broader social and cultural issues rather than architectural functions, aesthetics or symbolic meanings. The briefs or programs are vital as a vehicle where it is most possible to work between theory and practice, allowing students to develop conceptual thinking to critique or to reinvent the brief itself. Writings of various fields are often set as pretext to each project in order to create architecture that not only "appears" and "means" but also "fits." In other words, the production of architecture is not only to generate forms and meanings but has to be considered in relation to social and cultural framework of the place and time. As for theoretical research, approaching it from this mode of thinking differs from conventional history/theory method in a way that sites or subjects of study

are not only investigated and researched, but they are often critiqued and intervened in order to find relevant implications in current architectural design issues.

4. Critical Theory and Interdisciplinarity

Dividing critical theory into three different modes does not mean that they are being practiced and taught separately. The three modes of aesthetic, semantic and ideological approaches may also work together to create a new set of questions. Yet, despite their differences, all critical theories have something in common which lies in their interdisciplinarity. In most academic context, the terms mutidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are often interchangeable. Yet at the core of their methods, the two notions are different. Mutidisciplinarity refers to a way of working where a number of disciplines are present but maintain their own distinct identities and ways of doing things [16]. Interdisciplinairy, on the other hand, allows individuals to move between disciplines and in so doing question the ways in which they work. In other words, it is more of a collaboration that the emphasis is less on disciplinary distinctions and more on how different disciplines work together towards end points through mutual consent [17].

In the aesthetic, semantic and ideological modes of critical theory, multiple disciplines are fully engaged, whether artistic, scientific, anthropological, social, cultural, political or economic. This means critical theory requires a mode of thinking that is not restricted to only one professional field. It occupies a place in-between where movement or methodology between theory and practice cannot be linear. Thus, critical theory can be seen a three dimensional web of relationship between disciplines that call into questions what we normally take for granted. At times, this web of interdisciplinarity may require that we question our methodologies, the way we do things, our terminologies. Each historical moment offers a particular set of conditions, depending on their own circumstances, and each person takes a different point of view. In many ways, the emerging practice of critical theory may unite theory and practice as a transformative, although difficult, way of working which is rigorous, reflective, creative, productive as well as critical.

Understanding different theoretical approaches may help us understand the forces that have helped shape the history of our discipline. Both theory and practice characterize the way others performed architectural thinking in the past, which is indispensable in shaping our future. They are at a distance to us in that their historical context becomes essential to understand them. Yet, they are present in that they stand in front of us as partial answers to the questions we ask ourselves today.

5. Acknowledgement

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