

# The Architectural Review



*How do cover it all?*

# Critical practice

In gathering fragments, ideas, histories and more, architects can build the ground beneath them to construct a critical architecture, writes  
*Andrew Clancy*

I write, with due awareness of the risk in doing so, about the possibility of critical practice in architecture today.

I describe it as risky as I am aware of the contingencies of practice, bound as it is to capital and enmeshed in the vagaries of the world. Buildings are called into being by needs and desires in society, assembled from materials provided with the cultural disinterest of the market and to rules and regulations set by legislators and bureaucrats. They enclose events, rituals and processes which embrace the full breadth of human experience. Our discipline is positioned in the cultural history of this built negotiation over time, an abrasion between ideal and real, as fruitful as it is frustrating. Where in this gathering is there space for practice to be critical? Have we not been driven, chastened, from these fields? We are only a paragraph in and already this feels like unstable ground to stand on.

Criticality is a slippery term. It feels apt, and inevitable, to start with Kenneth Frampton's 1981 essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance', in which he describes an architecture held in resistant tension between a universal commodified culture of architecture and the remnants of regional types and languages. One year later, in his essay 'Between Culture and Form', Michael Hays defines a 'critical architecture' as resistant to both 'Culture' – the risk of confirming operations as the 'self' of a dominant culture of 'detached autonomy of an abstract formal system'. Curiously he does not cite Frampton and yet resistance again describes how architecture might meaningfully interact with global commodified culture without being dissolved by it. Both writers reject disengagement from this culture completely, with criticism emerging from a conscious reconciliation of two polarities and allowing the architect to operate as a part of broader culture, and yet maintain some distance. Criticality is found in this frictional questioning, producing a work which captures key aspects of contemporary society and parallel currents in architecture and territorial expression. This tendency to an internal architectural conversation which Hays describes dominated much of the publicly celebrated architectural production since; for all the sophistication of geometry, allusion and form, the space for meaning dwindles in an enquiry towards the purely visual.

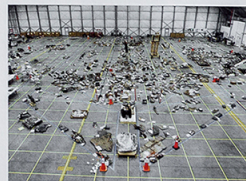
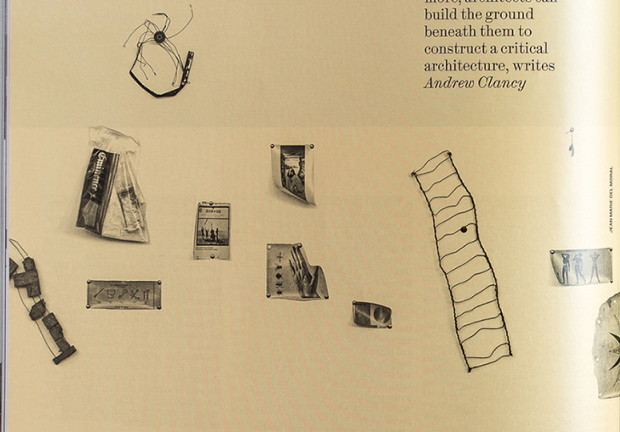
It is no accident that Hays and Frampton wrote so similarly, so close in time. The heroic impulse of so many of architectures 'isms' was spent by the 1980s. Mirroring broader society, architecture was confronting a great fragmentation of culture which had been building for centuries. As the empirical sciences advanced

mechanistically towards a form of universal knowledge from the 17th to the 19th centuries, the same interrogation also liberated individuals from belief-based structures which had previously subsumed them. Meaning on a cultural level was no longer an effect of a higher cause, or objective reason, but situated in each conscious individual, paradoxically partly driving the tendency to commodified consumerism. Both globalised capitalism and the fragmentation of belief erode even the polarities described by Hays and Frampton. Regionalism and autonomy remain as ideas, but diminished as absolutes. They now so resemble aspects of the commodified general culture that no friction remains, except performatively.

We are told that architects only design a small percentage of buildings constructed today. Smiles as it is, this percentage also means architects are designing more of the built environment than at any point in history. This is architecture as a general practice, working on ordinary things. Here the weight of the architectural intention is slight in comparison to the regulatory, budgetary and social contexts it operates in. In *One-Way Street*, Walter Benjamin writes, 'criticism is a matter of correct distancing, to adopt a standpoint. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible. Now things press too urgently on human society'. How can a practice be critical when it is so inherently intertwined with the culture it fundamentally serves? Ours is a time where the agency of the architect has to be developed in negotiation, as a catalyst, or even as an activist. The carbon crisis gives a further layer of contingency, the retrofit increasingly a site for the production of architectural thinking, and the layered tectonics which result from the need for thermal insulation producing an upheaval in the nature of architectural language. In this, I see a plurality of critical practice, operating almost everywhere in the world, as generative and rich manner.

I see a gathering at work, not in terms of literal parts alone but as a critical assembly of ideas, time, skills, materials and networks. In this sense it brings to mind Bruno Latour's use of the term in his essay 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?'. He proposes that if the early 20th century was shaped by positivism, then the philosophic task of the late 20th century was to tease out its limits – to question, to doubt, to show how this apparently unitary world was in fact fragmentary and contested. Today, our task is to gather this into a new pluralistic cohesiveness. Just as the image of 20th-century modernity might be the plane, Latour suggests that an image for our times is of the careful reassembly of the wreckage from the *Columbia* shuttle disaster of 2003.

Juan Miró collected ephemera in his studio in Palma de Mallorca (opposite). 'Only use the objects I find,' he explained. 'I gather them together in my studio.' In February 2003, the Space Shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated on re-entry to the Earth's atmosphere, killing all seven astronauts. The debris was collected and 'reassembled' on the floor of a hangar (below), in an attempt to learn what caused the catastrophe.







In the shadow of a profound loss, fragments were gathered from where they fell from all across the US and assembled in a vast interior. A gathering of parts and people, they were brought together to reveal meaning in conversations and speculative negotiation. They are trying to make something more from the fragments.

Lairou sees this as a way for criticism to renew itself. In architecture, it is this activity which similarly informs critical practice. Architecture has always been about a gathering to an extent: we see it in Frampton's essay, and many other theories of architecture. There is an opening up of new terrain, new ethical considerations that shape work in an expanded reading of context. For those that are practising critically, this gathering begins with an openness and an awareness that resistance might no longer need to be situated in each architect. Instead, resistance is produced through the complex layers of contingency that are intertwined with the making of architecture. The critical practitioner broadens this territory so that historical considerations, social aspects, political ideas, narratives from client and site, practical ideas of making or assembly, territorial ideas, and many more are in play. Architecture's own past successes and failures are also present – a means to re-engage with optimism while remaining clear-sighted. I am reminded of Lina Bo Bardi in her call for 'architecture not as built work, but as possible means to be and to face (different) situations'.

This is a form of practice as comfortable working with existing buildings – graftings, annexes, extensions – as new. This gathering provides a means by which found ideas inform, and are informed by, the emerging architectural idea. An archaeology of process and an assembly of found skills, materials and products navigate globalised manufacturing of materials alongside local techniques. Although the architect might no longer be the sun at the centre of a helio-centric universe, if indeed they ever were, their spatial and cultural history is far from irrelevant: they are as much a part of the sites they work on as other factors. This architecture is regional, perhaps, but more than this it is conditional, shaped by the conditions of its site in all its potentials. Held in a position between multiple moments of resistance, it is less a matter of an all-powerful, singular will driving an idea, than an openness to finding an equilibrium, developing multiple ideas into an emergent coherence. Artist Robert Rauschenberg is talking about this I think when he says 'concepts weight thought... We hold a concept and the world begins to have an up and down, and we can strive to our concepts, assign a set of values, grade our success and pass on the sets as knowledge. This is all an illusion;

a weightless mind is more reasonable; in time we will learn to live with it'.

Today we see architecture being remade with a position of territorially situated, critically informed languages, found in this open interrogation. This is not an architecture separated by divisions of style, but galvanised by the sincerity of the questions that propel the work. This form of practice builds its ground in uncertainties. Bricolage and the ad hoc inform its thinking, as described by critic Irviné Scalbert, but I think it goes beyond this seeking out constraints, gathering more by considering the site in both its physical and social cutlages, and working towards a skillfully woven synthesis. As Bachelard puts it: 'When contradictions accumulate, things come alive'. Taking the form of an extended conversation with the world, this form of practice frequently uses teaching, libraries, archives, drawings, narratives and material knowledge as an armature, presenting opportunities for recognition within the contingencies of practice. A critical practice is concerned with the tangible reality of the built artefact and yet aware of its openness and its ability to accrete new meanings in habit and time. No longer tethered to a governing style, this architecture is serious, nimble, malleable – useful attributes to handle the challenges facing us. It is precise about how it is made, generous, optimistic and concerned with contributing to society with the diffuse action of multiple individuals. This practice is not nostalgic – the fragments it deals with are not treated longingly as a part of some lost whole, but rather as the emergent potential for what comes next.

Each building can be thought of as an encyclopaedia, as a method of knowledge and as a network of connections between the events, the people and the things of the world. At a time when we need to rethink so much the need for each architect to build the ground under their feet, finding a means of entering and navigating the discipline is a key challenge. Here is a critical architecture made in empathy, accreting meaning from the habits of its production and its use. This is a gathering of frequently divergent ideas which collectively captures both broader impulses and the discrete acts of individuals. Behind it all there is a feeling: something found in the awareness of limits and yet the need to act, a distrust of pencelessness and of obscurantist profundity; its vulnerability the very thing that gives it meaning. I think the word I am looking for is joy. Like a belly laugh at a funeral of a life well lived. I realise, as I write this in the isolation of a pandemic, that I might be accidentally veering close to writing a manifesto. So be it, but time enough to stop typing. It was in the gathering some ground was made, intact just long enough to briefly bear my weight.

The studio is a place for gathering – sketches, models, paintings, postcards, souvenirs. Flires & Pratt's studio in Barcelona (opposite) is one example. Tadas Ando's studio (below) is a vessel for collected books, artworks and models

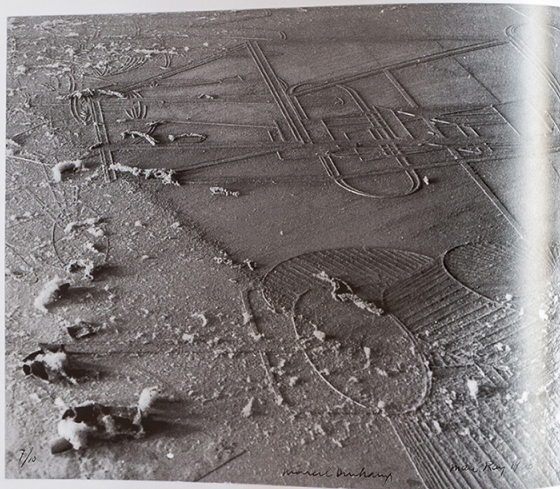


TADAS ANDO



Man Ray's photograph  
*Dust Breeding* from 1920  
captures the surface of  
Duchamp's *The Large  
Glass* after it had collected  
a year's worth of dust.  
Taken with a two-hour-  
long exposure,  
the photograph is a

collaboration between the  
two artists, and a crucial  
part of the development  
of this artwork. Later,  
Duchamp wiped the dust  
from the glass, leaving  
just a small area (the  
cone) fixed in place  
with clear varnish



Tom de Paor

This is the last entry in my  
notebook, in acrylic paint  
- trabuccations. I made them  
as sets and prompt for a  
much bigger painting



## The open sketchbook

The sketch reveals more than a neat  
presentation drawing or glossy  
photograph. Fourteen architects  
liberate their sketchbook into public  
architectural conversation



## Collecting Ideas

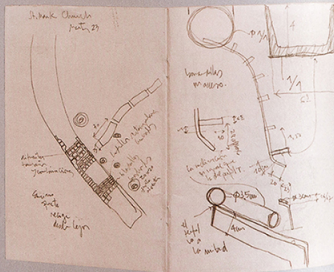
It is in the art of collecting, where architects learn from precedent, from things already built. Assembling critiques as well as seeking reference. It is also a way of prethinking. Through sketching as a form of visual note-taking, the architect's interpretation of their surroundings and observations is inflected with embodied preoccupations. It is this way of gathering is disclosed, origins and influences can be revealed which offer fuller connections between architect's work. The sketcher rearranges, reorders, recombines, fictionalises, but in a fluent obliqueness rephrases ideas on paper and sets new conditions for invention.



## Flores & Prats

These pages are from a visit to St Mark's Church by Egor Lernerstein in Stockholm in December 2016. The sketch was made in situ, containing the spontaneity of direct observation, and ruling on the paper that curiously about what is being

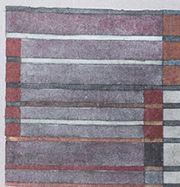
looked at. Drawing is a way of thinking the hand and the mind go together. As soon as you start drawing in front of something that catches your attention, questions appear and they make you look and draw and look again.



## Rozana Montiel

Drawing is an exercise of transforming space into a habitable place. I use Post-Its as graphic aphorisms, collecting the observations and solutions reached in the rehabilitation of public spaces, including the Comienzo-Indio project in Mexico City in 2016 (28 March 2017) and the Fremont playground, completed in Zacatecas in 2016. The Post-Its are both process and result: they are non-linear and thematic. They are a way of looking at reality in order to transform it.

'Sometimes I forget what I've done, and only go back to drawings after many years. If, decades later, the right conditions arise, then I'll look again at the idea I've drawn'



## Walt Architects

Gil T. Planje documented the consequences of the South African 1913 Natives Land Act in the form of oral histories, sketches and also clippings of plants. Bessie Good later wrote that Planje's book provided an important 'missing link' in most Black South African 'very broken sense of history'. These pressed plant clippings are from our research project 'Summer Flowers', taken from forced removal sites

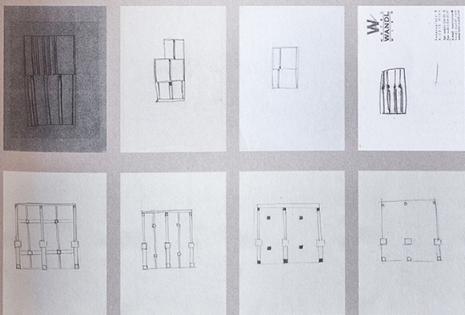
in and around Cape Town and from Bessie Good's house in Botswana. One hundred and seven years after Black South Africans were dispossessed by the Natives Land Act, we still see the consequences of this colonial spatial violence. We fill our notebooks with these gatherings as a way to remember this history, and as a way to reflect on how our designs could intervene in restorative and ethical ways.



## Francesca Torio

For a primary school in Hubei, in southern China, the architectural proposal begins from continuity with the character, or the cultural expression, of the existing, living archaeology. These watercolours are a search for the spatial relations, in which plans, sections and views merge in only apparently abstract images. They may distill the experience of what is there and rephrase it into

something different. These notes on spatial relations do not focus on preconceived ratios or figures or lines; form is yet to come, as it depends on the negotiation of innumerable variables. Nevertheless, the building of all here is staggered: beams of concrete on concrete pillars and walls ordered on a gently sloping topography, sequencing rooms and gardens and more, over rooms and gardens



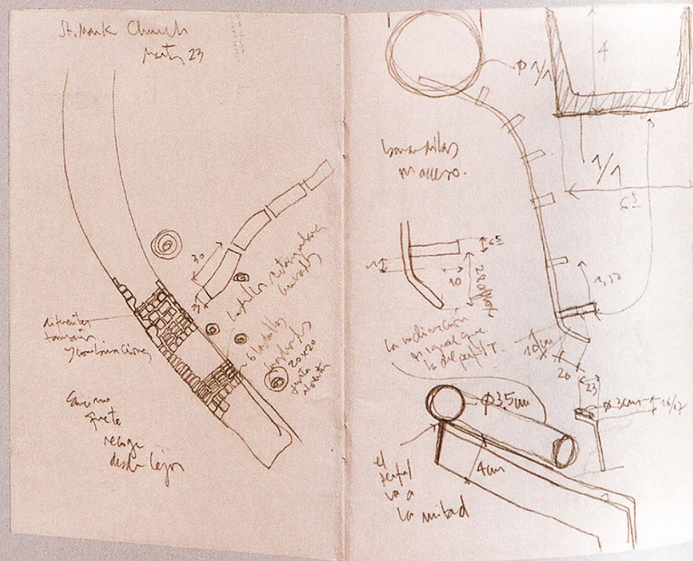
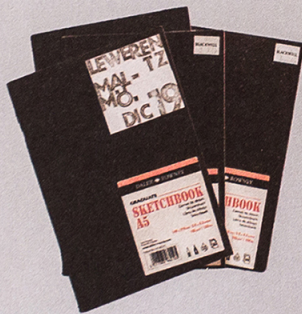
## Peter Märkl

I do two different types of drawing. The ones that relate directly to a project are always small - necessarily so, because they express only what is essential, the details are not yet clear. The other kind are the two-dimensional drawings that I use continually to explore certain themes - like the forms of buildings and certain orders, the relation of a single element to the whole, or colour. These are A4 - my preferred format for more than 10 years - and they're never done in isolation, but always part of a series. This work is not tied to a specific brief, but may be inspired by something I've seen in a book, for example. Sometimes I forget what I've done, and only go back to drawings after many years. If, decades later, the right conditions arise, then I'll look again at the idea I've drawn.



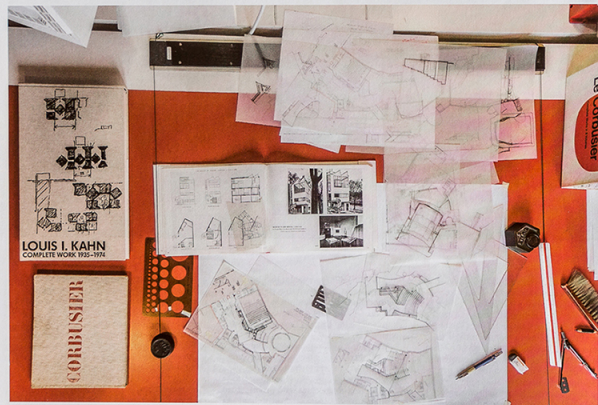
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looked at. Drawing is a way of thinking; the hand and the mind go together. As soon as you start drawing in front of something that catches your attention, questions appear and they make you look and draw and look again



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at the idea I've drawn'





"Louis Kahn's open material makes it easier to enter and participate in the design, the uncertainty of the process of developing a project, finding affinities between what we see in the book and what we have on the drawing board." Flores & Pratts discuss their most recent and important books in the first chapter of the AR's new podcast, the AR Bookshelf. Listen now at [architectural-review.com/podcasts](http://architectural-review.com/podcasts)

FLORES & PRATTS

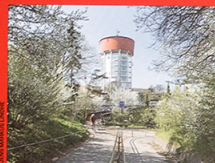
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