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Post Critical Again

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POST-CRITICAL AGAIN

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I've lived through this before.

It was an interesting time. Many were disillusioned with the limitations of design exploration in commercial practice. There were frequent, fervent, and quiet discussions standing before collections of strange drawings and objects.Classrooms, journals and lecture halls erupted with heated arguments about what constituted "a critical stance."Design was championed as a resistant, cultural practice rather than a client-dependent profession.
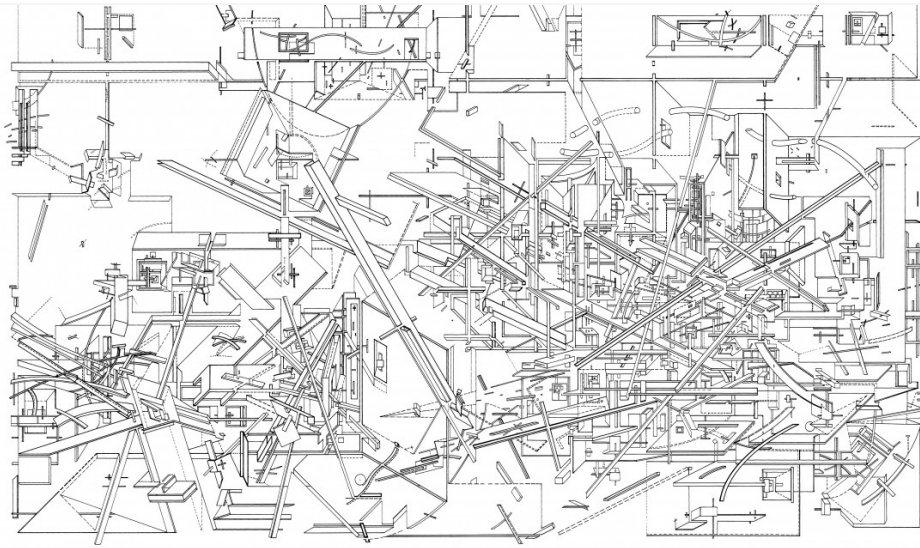
Daniel Libeskind, Micromegas Series, 1979

I was bored by it.

It was the nineties. I was in architecture school. Architectural discourse was still under the sway of architects like Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi, who drew on post-structuralism, critical theory and continental philosophy and focused their considerable skill and attention on architecture for its own sake.

Their drawings, models and buildings were discursive artifacts."… utilitarian objects whose primary purpose is to communicate ideas —they encourage discourse. These are tools for thinking; they raise awareness and perhaps understanding of substantive and often debatable issues of psychological, sociological, and ideological consequence." [1] For the architects, they were manifestos for architecture as an autonomous cultural practice, and screed against the petty demands of the corporate profession.

But it turned out alright (I think).

Within a few years, there emerged a more pragmatic (in the sense of John Dewey and the American school of philosophy rather than in a utilitarian or instrumental sense) approach to architecture. One

that sought to merge the meta-analysis of critical practices with the patient practice of wielding ideas through buildings to effect change. These post-critical practices were "shaped not by concepts like resistance and novelty, but by the need to solve pressing and large-scale communal, ethical, corporate, computational and global problems." [2]

In retrospect, the paper architects, as they were called, made important contributions to the reinvigoration of the discipline even if they offered only an incomplete prescription for the renovation of the field.

Flash forward

Design (with a small d) is again bored – now by the limited opportunities to explore larger issues offered by conventional corporate practice. The opportunities to exhibit, share and publish design provocations have expanded and audiences and conversations continue to grow. The blogs host heated discussions about what precisely differentiates critical, discursive, adversarial, and speculative design.Design is again being championed as a politically relevant practice.
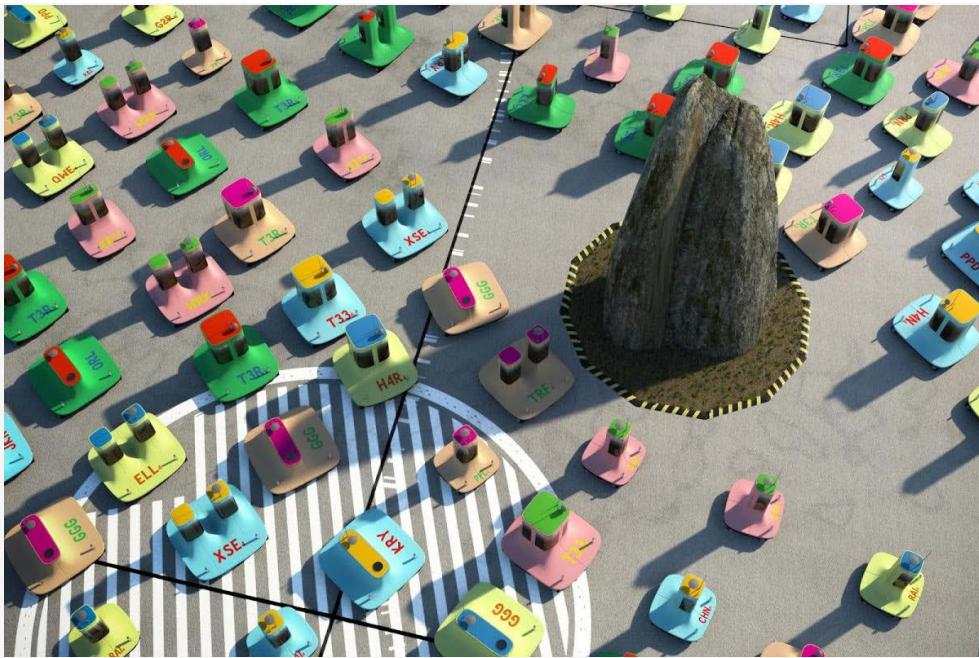
Dunne & Rabby, Digitarian Cars,
United Micro Kingdoms, 2013

I still hope it will turn out alright.

While I believe the claims made regarding the political and social pressures that autonomous modes of cultural production can exert are overwrought (though let me admit here that I am often inspired by these works) I do hope that critical design represents an essential step in the maturation of my field.

For as important as design dialogues about "issues of psychological, sociological, and ideological consequence" may be, they are far from sufficient to address the larger communal, ethical and global problems that we face.

To my eye, the survival of our species and our institutions depend upon our collective ability to address these problems. Design has a constructive, if contingent, role to play in helping to frame these problems, frame approaches to their solution and produce parts of those solutions.

Flash backward

In 2002 Mark Jarzombek closes his discussion of post critical and critical architecture with this plea:

I believe that to have a truly vigorous discussion in the field of architecture we will need all three forms of critical practice. The future is on the side of the first [post-critical], and tradition on the side of the second [critical]. But without the third [earlier in the article he describes the third as a "akin to investigatory journalism], critical practice is either a self fulfilling prophecy or a chimera. [3]

Again I find great resonance with the experience of our colleagues in Architecture. What is required for the significant renovation of our field and for the effective expansion of the contributory promise of critical design is a rich and vigorous relationship between a post-critical practice that is not seduced by solution-ism (today's geo-engineering, for example appears to be our equivalent of the specters of reductionism and techno-centrism that haunted architecture);, a speculative practice that continues to examine the deeper social, political, cultural and systemic origins of the problems we face; and a healthy culture of criticism to keep us honest.

It is my hope that the *Critical Design / Critical Futures Symposium* represents a step in that direction.

[1] Tharp, Bruce M., and Stephanie M. Tharp. "The Four Fields of Industrial Design (No, Not Furniture, Trans, Consumer, Electronics, Toys)." Core 77. 5 Jan. 2009. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

[2] Jarzombek, Mark. "Critical or Post-Critical?" *Architectural Theory Review* 7.1 (2002): p149.

[3] Jarzombek, Mark. "Critical or Post-Critical?" Architectural Theory Review 7.1 (2002): p149.