



CRITICALITY IN, ON AND FOR DESIGN

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF CRITICISM IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN

Course responsible:

Lisa Diedrich, Prof. of Landscape Architecture/Director, SLU Urban Futures
Andrea Kahn, Prof. of site thinking in research and design, SLU

Examiner:

Lisa Diedrich, SLU

Higher education credits: 4 ECTS

Subject area: Landscape Planning/ Landscape Architecture

Language: English

Prerequisites: Registered PhD students related to design, architecture, landscape architecture and planning.

For application requirements and deadline, see page 7 below.

Criticism is riskier than commentary. It is willing to ... stake out and substantiate a particular position... Miriam Gusevich¹

Introduction

Urban spaces and places present very complex and layered realities. Design criticism invites consideration of this complexity from a range of perspectives. By reflecting upon, among others, the formal, social, cultural, economic, political, spatial and aesthetic aspects of a specific design work, design critique describes and explains particular cases while at the same time contributing generalizable illuminations relevant to an entire discipline.

Criticism requires taking a position on the place, agency and contributions of design. It offers a means of reflecting on the dynamic interplay of societal forces, creative processes and practice-based interventions that informs production of our constructed environment. The need for a broad range of readings of this shared built world argues for developing a robust critical discourse and a strong body of critique.

The transdisciplinary 'Criticality in, on and for design' course explores the phenomenon of critique and its importance for the design of buildings and landscapes. It offers the chance to engage with theoretical texts concerned with critique, analyze sample critiques and undertake an exercise in writing critique. Presented from a landscape architectural perspective, the course welcomes researchers from related design disciplines interested in critique's potential to strengthen design discourse and practice.

Course structure

The core of the course, a 2-day intensive seminar, coincides with the 10th International Landscape Architecture Biennale, held September 2018 in Barcelona, Spain. The seminar will take place in Barcelona and utilize Biennale events as 'course materials' for critical analyses and review during course discussion and work sessions. Prior to attending the core seminar, students undertake three types of preparatory work.

Note: Applicants must confirm availability to travel to Barcelona. Course participants will get access to Biennale events (at reduced or no fee, TBD), but will be responsible for their own travel and accommodation costs.

¹ "The Architecture of Criticism: A Question of Autonomy", Miriam Gusevich, in ed. A. Kahn, DRAWING/BUILDING/TEXT (1991: Princeton Architectural Press, New York)

Coursework

Preparatory coursework (independent): The preparatory work allows participants to familiarize themselves with a shared body of literature and guidelines for critique writing. During the 2-week period prior to the group meeting in Barcelona, students will:

- read required literature and prepare rhetorical précis for each require reading (according to guidelines provided)
- analyze 2 sample critiques (selected from a list to be provided)
- write a preliminary critique of a design work

estimated time: 40h

Seminar coursework: The core seminar enables participants to reflect on the place of criticism in design fields, the critical positions they adopt in their own work, and how to elaborate a critique based on set guidelines.

Over the 2-day session, course members will engage with three types of literature: theoretical texts on the practice and place of criticism in academic and professional contexts; sample critiques; and practical guidelines for producing critiques. During the seminary meetings, rhetorical précis will be used to guide discussions of theoretical literature; sample critiques will be analyzed, presented and discussed to gain insight on how they are produced; and insights from the analysis will be used to develop critique writing on preselected design works. The session also includes two lectures: Andrea Kahn, design theorist, SLU professor and founder of designCONTENT, a strategic consultancy for designers, will address the place of critique and critical thinking in research; Lisa Diedrich author of published critiques, and editor of LAE, will discuss the critique more specifically within the context of landscape architecture as academic discipline and professional practice.

Post-seminar coursework: 4 weeks devoted to finalizing the critique text. Final critique texts will be evaluated by Lisa Diedrich and Andrea Kahn
estimated time: 60h

Working time table

15 March 2018

Preliminary course information available, circulated through networks

15 April 2018

Last day of registration

15 July 2018

Distribute updated course information, including final literature list, course schedule, participant list and assignments for analysis of existing critiques

10-24 September 2018

Preparatory work period. Preliminary critique outline and analyses of sample critiques due 24 September, 2018

25-28 September 2018

Core PhD seminar (2 lecture/discussion days and 2 Biennale days)

Day 1 Lectures and Discussions

09.00-09.30 Introduction

09.30-11.00 Reading session #1 – “Practical Guidelines”

Lisa Diedrich: Lecture on Critique in Landscape Architecture followed by group discussion of Guidelines texts, Part 1

Break

11.15-12.30 Group Discussion (part 2) of sample critique analyses with focus on critique format [FORM] – or *how to* write critique

13.30-15.00 Reading session #2 – “Theoretical Frames”

Andrea Kahn, short lecture on critical thinking and position taking in research, followed by group discussion of Theoretical Framework texts.

Break

15.30-16.00 Short lecture by an author of critique, followed by discussion with author

Optional: dinner with teachers and participants

26 September 2018

Present/discuss critique writing

Day 2 Inputs provided to PhD students

09.30-12.30 PhDs’ present pre-prepared critiques outlines; 5-10 minutes per participant. Evaluative discussion; comparison with sample critiques and practical guidelines

Discussion with focus on position and argument development [CONTENT] - *why to* write critique

Discussion of strengths and weaknesses of preliminary PhD critiques in small groups with teachers

Lunch break / work break

15.00-18.00 *Discussion of next writing steps*

Each participant presents responses to morning inputs (ideas on updated method, research questions and work plan changes). Preparation for listening critically to Rosa Barba presentations.

27 September, attend ROSA BARBA presentations at Biennale

1 November 2018

Submittal of final design critique

Course description

Background

Critical discourse plays a key role in situating contemporary creative production and instigating reflective debate. Critical thinking “channels change” (Dave Hickey) and propels theory and practice forward. In-depth criticism nevertheless remains a relatively rare phenomenon in design fields directly concerned with the conception and realization of our constructed environment. Given the proven power of criticism to enrich and help evolve theoretical positions and professional practices, we aim to mobilize this potential to the benefit of landscape architecture, architecture, planning and urban design.

Built upon rigorous research, description and explanation of specific cases, well-crafted critical reflections illuminate and enrich knowledge of realized projects, design proposals, and even communications concerning design works. Further, case-driven critique of the outcomes of design practices such as landscape architecture can point to, and point out, generalizable reflections, questions and issues relevant to and beneficial for strengthening understanding of an entire discipline.

Course content

The course has 3 aims: to create an understanding of how criticism works, by studying examples of critique; to situate the operations of criticism and critique within a broader theoretical, discursive and historical research context; and to give participants an opportunity to use this understanding to sharpen their critique-writing skills.

The 2-day core seminar includes close reading of relevant literature, using the tool of the *rhetorical précis* to improve critical reading skills; analyses of sample critiques, to increase familiarity with critique-writing formats; presentation and discussion of a preliminary critique outlines (drafted by PhD participants in advance, and submitted before the 2-day core seminar), to strengthen constructive critical skills.

Results and requirements

Course participants are expected to

- read the compulsory course literature
- write “rhetorical précis” and use them as a critical reading tool (instructions will be provided)
- analyze sample critiques
- prepare an ‘outline/preliminary’ critique prior to the seminar
- attend a 2-day seminar and actively contribute to discussions
- hand in the elaborated critique at the end of the course

Critical reading/precis writing

Participants will utilize the “rhetorical précis” method to critically synopsise required reading. This tool for recording and understanding the essential elements of a text follows a tightly structured format. It focuses reader attention on the relation between *what* a piece of writing says (its content), and *how* that message gets conveyed (its form). In a short, four-sentence paragraph, précis-writers present the author and genre of a text, explain its discursive context, synopsise the major assertion or thesis, mode of argumentation, stated and/or apparent purpose, and define the relationship between author and audience. More analytical and less neutral than a simple summary, rhetorical précis-writing builds analytic and critical reading skills by exposing value frameworks at work in the development of arguments by paper authors and their readers/interpreters. [Clear instructions on how to write a “rhetorical précis” will be provided to in advance, and students will be expected to adhere to these discussions.]

Analyzing sample critiques

During the seminar participants present their analyses of sample critiques (prepared in advance). The analyses should address how the sample critiques are structured as texts and the clarity and line of their argumentation. To do so requires taking into account:

- the reasoning for selecting the particular project/case;
- the methods used to evaluate the design/project;
- the means of developing of a critical position/argument, for example
 - the role of the designer’s intentions in developing the argument;
 - the role of the client’s goals in developing the argument;
 - the specific design elements addressed in the critique;
- “lessons-learned” derived from the case;
- the proposed readership/audience of the critique.
- writing tone and style (professional or academic)

Critique Writing

During the seminar participants will present the outline of a design critique for inputs and develop this preliminary draft into a final illustrated paper, not to exceed 2000 words, guidelines to be provided.

Course evaluation

Participants complete a course evaluation questionnaire after the seminar.

Final critique requirements

Each participant will submit a PDF and a text file, following submission guidelines provided during the core seminar. (November 2018 TBD)

Preliminary partial course literature list

Required literature

methodological guidelines

Avermaete, T., Diedrich, L., de Wit, S., The Vicissitudes of Criticism in the Landscape Metropolis, editorial (SPOOL, Vol. 5 Issue 1)

Dooren, N. van (2018) The Landscape of Critique. The state of critique in landscape architecture and its future challenges (SPOOL, Vol. 5 Issue 1).

Kahn, A, (2016), connect to history and do good, to what end? Transverse thinking about practice ('scape ezine 1/ 2017/ 'scape the international magazine of landscape architecture and urbanism)

critical theory

Colquhoun, A., Introduction: Modern Architecture and Historicity, in *Essays in Architectural Criticism, Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge, MIT Press, Oppositions Books, 1981)

Frampton, K., Preface to Alan Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism, Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge, MIT Press, Oppositions Books, 1981)

Gusevich, M., The Architecture of Criticism: A Question of Autonomy” in ed. A. Kahn, *DRAWING/BUILDING/TEXT* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1991)

Till, J. selections from *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2009)

Recommended Literature (to come)

Sample critiques (to come)

Application Requirements

Applicants should submit an abstract of their PhD and a paragraph with their motivation for participating in this course to Profs. Lisa Diedrich (lisa.diedrich@slu.se) and Andrea Kahn (andrea.kahn@slu.se).

Application letters due 15 April 2018