

# "What about critique at an institution, Mr. Emerson?"

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## «What about critique at an institution, Mr. Emerson?»

«The department at ETH is very large with many different positions and pedagogical methods. At ETH, like many continental school, there is a strong hierarchy between professor, student and assistant. When I was studying at Cambridge, I would never call my professor: «professor». It's almost unthinkable. What you call a professor is not so important but it does make authority and power visible which runs all the way through teaching to evaluation.

One of the sacred parts of the academic structure in Cambridge is that a teacher is never allowed to grade his or her own students (this is done by a committee of examiners from other studios). Students can therefore have a very lively relationship with their professor; one that is full of conflicts, of stimulation and agreement but it can never be carried to the assessment (which does not necessarily produce better work). The evaluation and the strong hierarchy at ETH is a factor in the maintaining of a certain status quo. It can be more difficult for a student at ETH to disagree than it would for a student in Cambridge. I would not say that Cambridge or the AA are better schools. I believe that ETH provides one of the best educations in architecture in the world. But there is space for more critical discourse. The AA has more cross-studio forums within which the work is debated. This means that it's not just the work of the students which is discussed but it's also the position of the studio. The people leading the studio, whether they're professors or not, are accountable within the school. At ETH, the structure is almost like separate studio/professorship silos. Each one is untouched by another. Maybe the students do not see us debating enough amongst ourselves.

The ETH is such a big school that it has a lot of inertia. It's difficult to change a culture that is deeply rooted in the institution, in the structure, in the building. But we are witnessing an interesting time in the department. There are and will be many new professors within a very short period of time. It will be interesting to see how that evolves. I'm excited but I wouldn't expect radical changes overnight. It is more likely that there will be a progressive evolution. Institutions like the ETH shouldn't change too fast, they would lose a lot of the depth that is in the department. It's not just the chairs which are powerful, it's also the collective knowledge and traditions. Where power comes from and how it's exercised is not that well understood or transparent in the department. If it was more visible, we could squeeze, push and twist more critically. I try to create an environment in which criticism is encouraged. I'm not easily offended and if somebody disagrees with me it's fine. It requires a certain amount of maturity, confidence and mutual respect on both sides to accept significant differences and allow them to be under the same roof. It's also about the pedagogical methodology. To what extent are you instructing, or do you know the correct solution before

you started? If this inquiry is open ended, there's more space for students to be involved, critical and forming the agenda as well as responding to it. Finding the balance between developing a precise position and offering enough freedom to be critically active is one of the most important journeys students and teachers need to search for.»

«Do you think that it is your job to provide this confidence to students?»

«Yes, that is most certainly part of my job and their job. I hope that I allow students to talk about what they think and what they feel in an honest and candid way. I have to try and channel their comments critically and productively. At the same time, I wonder how easy it is to feel safe in your protest in a group of 60-65 students? One voice in 65 is a very small minority. In the UK, we have 12 or 14 students in a studio. One voice rings louder.

I think this also has to do with the broader cultural and political situations that are pretty much defining our times. It is not only in architecture that critical debate could be stronger, it is also in political engagement. I wish that students would be more politically assertive, that I would be more often challenged by different positions. The way in which your generation exercises its opinion, its power, its feelings, is very different to previous generations. The media, means, and processes are fundamentally different. «Where am I supposed to find a sense of identity and the confidence to be critical?». It's fascinating. Macron, Trump are they both the product of the same system, a new type of popular, highly individual rejection of established positions and institutions? Is there going to be a revolution at ETH next year? I don't know. You know it better.»

«And maybe, as a final question, how would you relate criticality with the pavilions that you have so often done?»

«There are various theoretical and thematic ideas in these projects but there are also social ones. It has to do with getting students to know one another, to trust each other, to realize what they can get from one another, as well as from their teachers. Creatively and critically it is an interesting process to go through. When do you stand up and say: «no» and when do you just participate and help push the whole thing along? It does not mean being endlessly individualistic. Being critical is knowing when there is a bigger purpose that's worth working for. It's about the confrontation of the idea with individual authorship and responsibility towards one's own work, and one's responsibility towards what is fundamentally collective and shared. Architects need to know the difference and how to behave accordingly.»

This text is taken from the skype interview with Tom Emerson between Zurich and London the 16th of June 2017 by Vincent Bianchi and Yann Salzmann.