

"How can students be critical today, Mr. Dietz?"

Autor(en): **Dietz, Dieter / Bianchi, Vincent / Salzmann, Yann**

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«How can students be critical today, Mr. Dietz?»

«In my view we should start with questions rather than with answers, and work in a way that they remain open and do not close upon themselves. Very often we are confronted with situations where questions are already set as fixed problems. You may have a client who thinks he or she knows his or her needs. But those needs may be complex, and other than what he or she truly believes they are. This also goes for competitions. Many of the briefs would deserve further questions to be asked of them. Actually, any architectural project deserves to be questioned. I personally believe that being critical is about raising the right questions rather than solving problems.

Most students come from a system where they are taught how to solve problems to given questions. If you have to raise questions yourself, the mindset that you have to be engaging in is very different. Visions also come from there: they are not just answers to problems, they are new configurations of questions. If we engage in real problems we must rather treat them as potentials. Questions are not simply an individual's domain. This implies that we have to communicate with other people, and we have to find the languages that enable us to do so. They're not always the same. I'm not talking about different nationalities such as French, English etc., I'm talking about much more diverse cultures – especially between disciplines. Often it can prove difficult to build up an understanding between different groups.

In any pedagogical process, in architecture or other types of education, what matters fundamentally is civic engagement. You have to find ways to take part, to share, and to participate actively as one of many, with your own personal responsibility. What can be misunderstood is that voting, which is of course important in a democracy, is an engagement—but it is only a minimal one. You can do it at home or just go to any letter box in the city. That takes about ten minutes. Real engagement demands much more. What is unfortunately quite a sad development in recent times is that certain movements in many countries, including our own, have hijacked democracy in a negative manner. They use disengagement and disinterest as justifying forces. The worst about it is that they legitimize not being interested. That is, of course, the downfall of democracy: when disengagement and not caring about the other outweighs engagement. We have to engage and we have to share—with the public, with anyone.

Sometimes I am surprised that there is not more engagement, interest in engagement or care about what could be a bigger picture or vision. You have to be fairly blind not to be aware of how fragile the values are that are at stake today. I'm not just talking about architecture. In general, we are living in a very critical moment and I think the coming 2-5 years will be decisive in a way that will demand our entire engagement. As architects, we have the responsibility to propose spaces that are capable of taking on their

own mission. Spaces can actually do that, and sometimes it requires only a few simple gestures for people to begin to appropriate them.

What we are trying to do with ALICE* is to collapse hierarchies to become as flat as possible. The roles that are usually installed in institutions are not fostering engagement, they're rather hindrances to it. They predefine hierarchies, and create linear and unidirectional ways of communication. Horizontal structures do not always work and sometimes people may find a lack of clarity in them. However, if processes are well structured, most often they are valuable. On the other side, totalitarian regimes are very clear. I don't want to be too blunt but they are. There are other ways to live together, which are not always easy but we have to work them out. I truly believe that the biggest mistake that is occurring right now, including in Europe as a whole, is that we are closing borders. We should have had open borders ten years ago and we would not have the problem that we are facing today. I am totally convinced about that.

Finally, it's also about curiosity. It's very sad sometimes to see that some people simply are not curious. It's sad for any person, not for me but for themselves. What a dull life that must be, if you're not curious.»

*Atelier de la conception de l'espace, EPFL

This text is taken from the interview with Dieter Dietz led in front of the installation «HOUSE 2» at Pfingstweidstrasse Zurich the 6th of June 2017 by Vincent Bianchi and Yann Salzmänn.