

"What about critical thought within the design studio, Mr. Lütjens, Mr. Padmanabhan?"

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«What about critical thought within the design studio, Mr. Lütjens, Mr. Padmanabhan?»

«I find it very interesting that you mention the idea of critical thought in relation to architecture and architectural education. Every citizen should train his or her critical thinking. However, when you are an architect or when you train to be one, critical thought can be developed inside the architectural work rather than as an attitude supplied from outside. As designers, our personal experience was that our critical thinking was formed or challenged the most when we were confronted with certain realities that we would not accept.»

«Before being able to be critical, I think that you should be able to truly and without restraints, love something. We show buildings that we love to students, we talk about them, use them as references. Through our work we try to aspire to them, to push the students to engage with them. Of course, this does not mean that they will necessarily love the same thing, as we doubt that they will figure out what they like. You can only be critical about something, including the things you like, if you know what they are.»

«Our cultural situation as a civilization is very confusing. There are no canonic rules anymore in architecture. They have been lost. We do not believe in the reconstruction of a set of rules. We believe in their critical contemplation, case by case. What can you and what can you not do with them? Where are your limits? For us, criticality means understanding the logic of the architectural production, to partially accept it, and partially go against it.»

«How does this take place in your teaching?»

«Even though we are quite young and do not have much experience, I think that we have confidence in what we do and in the way we do it. We put a lot of thought and discussion into it. In the end, we stand in front of the students as the persons that we are, with little distance and a lot of enthusiasm of what architecture could be today. We believe that our teaching is highly optimistic and motivating for the students. We are almost the students' accomplices when we teach. We are not very critical; we do not sit back and say: «You should really have to look at that façade because it's not really working». We try to engage in a precise way to help the students to make a better project. Thus, when the critiques are over they know what to do next. We do not give them tasks as we would do in the office, but we are feeding them with ideas. We believe that the students should come as far as possible so that there is, in the end, an artifact that they can contemplate and really learn from. We believe that they should make five steps rather than one within the short amount of time of a semester.»

«The architectural culture that surrounds us is not always strong enough to support a critical discourse. In other words, we like to feed our students with great examples of architecture so that they look at them, speak

about them and make friends with them. If they stare at them long enough they will get a feeling of how great, how dense architecture can be in terms of its expression, sensuality, and ideas. We like to surround our students with what is for us the best buildings. Sometimes they are not from this place and sometimes they are not even from this time. After they have befriended these examples they can try to work with them. Because we do not give them directions on how to do it, their critical mind has to be super active. They have to make lots of tiny decisions in a very short time, they have to ask themselves: «What makes it good? Is it the construction, is it the form, is it the way it casts a shadow, is it the proportion, the texture or the figure?» We think that the immersion into the material is a precondition for any critical discourse or discussion.»

«We had this student who was always questioning everything. In the end, I had this feeling that he did not have a clue but that he was very good at questioning things. That also does not lead anywhere. There are a lot of briefs in competitions that you have to fulfill. Of course, you have to look for the possibilities, for the potential to produce something amazing. But if you do a «Genossenschaft» housing, they really know what they want, and it's not so boring. You can fulfill it and find out that something in this brief makes a possibility for amazing architecture.»

«We do not think that competition briefs should be changed. Rather we know that the brief does not ask for what we call architecture. It does not require the urbanity that is essential to our profession. We know that we have to fulfill it in the best possible way, better than anybody else. At the same time, we feel obliged to do architecture as we understand it. It's like another burden, another brief that's always there. If you do not do it your life is much easier. You can just glue things that function together and end up with a product to which you give a façade. For us saying: «no, it's not enough» is a profoundly critical operation. We feel that it's always an obligation to think of a possibility of the city in every single project.»

This text is taken from the interview with Oliver Lütjens and Thomas Padmanabhan led at their office in Zurich the 13th of June 2017 by Vincent Bianchi and Yann Salzmänn.