

# Crisis, whose crisis?

## Ivana Wingham

“Considered in its most basic terms, architecture always needs a project to establish its limits, and it needs a space to work in for such a project.”

Understanding architecture, and architectural education, in terms of its discontinuities opposes the perception of it as a unified discourse with coherent disciplinary boundaries. Michel Foucault believes that the power of ‘discontinuity’ is to create ‘cracks’ in the continuity of any perceived, or historically understood, unified system, be it science, medicine, architecture or even architectural education. And that only by systematically erasing the given unities are we able to investigate the incisions that discontinuity can make. Exposing a discontinuity in an apparently unified system will almost certainly result in the emergence of something different, however small. Foucault believes that discontinuity is ‘accident’ in the event (or statement) that neither language nor the meaning can quite exhaust. Being a ‘historical irruption’ discontinuity helps in freeing up the statements/events by which a particular continuity, or apparently natural groupings, are articulated so that we could be able to describe other unities, however provisional.<sup>1</sup>

When perceived to be in crisis, architecture’s discontinuity manifests itself through numerous disturbances at the level of discourse, academia or practice. Following Foucault’s logic, it is possible that crisis, if architecturally grounded, could become a tool for new object formations and spatial relationships, in which project and studio could be understood as spatially and temporally elastic concepts. This chapter utilizes the idea of discontinuity as a place of experimentation, in which innovation-seeking research and practice results in an alternative approach to architecture at the margins of disciplinary boundaries.

Shifts and anxieties in architecture are not new. Sitting in-between academia and profession, architecture and architectural education have historically been subjected to

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 21-31.

numerous historical models and institutional precedents from which new pedagogies emerged. Examples of pedagogical experiments include Alvin Boyarsky's *International Institute of Design*, ideas behind *Prince's Institute* and more recently Beatriz Colomina's and her postgraduate students research in the *International Laboratory of Architecture and Urban Design*. Other pedagogical experiments include Dan Hill's questioning of a different model of education about the training of an architect and also training of non-architects, as well as, Will Hunter's ideas that the latter part of architectural education could support 'proto-practice', and that the educational structures could reflect these new ways of working.<sup>2</sup> However most radical suggestions seem to come from Colomina's and her postgraduate students research that identified a number of educational experiments in the 60s and 70s that challenged the status quo by attempting to destabilize the very institutions they depended on, and in doing so "generated forms of institutional critique". In Colomina's definition, radical architectural pedagogy 'aspires to transgress its disciplinary limits and destabilize social, political, economical or technological conventions', utilizing new forms of 'instrumentality and conceptual speculation'.<sup>3</sup>

A discussion of the disciplinary unity and integrity of architecture at a global level is necessarily complex since a conception of architecture is always dependent upon, and structured professionally and academically by, the culture within which it operates. However, global discussions on architecture *do* happen, by means of exchanges of the knowledges, images, materials and design processes that architecture deploys. Architecture's particularity, on the other hand, *also* resides within the professional, institutional, bureaucratic and educational codes of a particular culture, and is closely protected by these. In 1974 Malcom Mac Ewan published *Crisis in Architecture* in which he wrote about a profession that was struggling with world economic crisis while at the same time contributing inefficient construction, which implicitly meant exploitation of land and communities that was also creating ecological imbalance.<sup>4</sup> Almost forty years ago these words and its consequences do not sound unfamiliar to the current situation in which

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<sup>2</sup> Dan Hill, "Forward" to *Future Practice*, by Rory Hyde, (London: Routledge, 2011), 14-15 and Will Hunter, "Alternative Routes for Architecture" in *The Architectural Review*, OCTOBER 2012, 1388. VOLUME CCXXXII.

<sup>3</sup> Beatriz Colomina with Esther Choi, Ignacio Gonzalez Galan and Anna-Maria Meister, "Radical Pedagogies in Architectural Education" in *The Architectural Review*, OCTOBER 2012, 1388. VOLUME CCXXXII.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm MacEwan, *Crisis in Architecture*, (London: RIBA Publications, 1974).

architecture finds itself. So when we hear words like ‘architecture in crisis’, as often heard in present debates on architectural education, what we may be facing is a dissociation of something perceived both culturally and globally - as historical continuity.

However, locating crisis at the heart of architecture need not be seen as a negative act. More optimistically, a crisis can be seen as ‘ultimately productive’; it forces and opens space for ‘invention’ and ‘new forms of production’. As Mark Wigley argues: ‘architectural design is the child of crisis but the field devotes itself to removing the sense of crisis’.<sup>5</sup>

Informed by economic, political and ideological shifts, architecture always has a role to play. The question is in which particular domain and to what degree. Linked to inventions in technology, the changing nature of building practice, aspirations towards intellectual domains and the disciplines of art and design, science and engineering, architecture has never had a permanent seat. It oscillates between differing, and at times conflicting, gravitational poles. Situating architecture as a discipline therefore consists of understanding its restlessness, mobility and state of permanent transformation, in history and at present. In Foucault’s terms, architecture is probably best characterized and individualized as a set of dispersed and heterogeneous statements operating between the main academic and professional systems that govern the division of architecture and its permanent, internal sense of crisis: an uncomfortable place of in-between.

In medical terms crisis is ‘the moment that a doctor decides that the patient is at the crucial turning point of either recovering or dying’ and this is the moment for a new discursive formation in Foucault’s terms. Being aware of this moment of opportunity for crucial change is important, since the declaration of crisis is a declaration that ‘the limit of a problem is not clear, and that a radical intervention needs to be done in the hope of reestablishing limits’. Architecture, being ‘the art of limits’, is in a positive dialectic with crisis, since ‘to declare a crisis is to declare that design is needed’.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Wigley, “Space in Crisis”, CRISIS: Bootleg Edition Urban China (C-Lab) for Volume (2009) Accessed March 23rd, 2013, <http://c-lab.columbia.edu/0158.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Wigley, “Space in Crisis”.

According to Foucault, a new 'object of discourse' emergence is dependent on 'discursive formations that get established between a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation and specification'. At that point a different, new discursive formation gets defined. At present there are a number of groups attempting to define new 'discursive formations', dispersed across a spectrum of differing fields of influence and interest. However, the 'object does not wait in limbo' but 'exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations'. In order that the system of relations could be called 'discursive', the limit of discourse has to be established, in other words a new set of relations needs to be established.<sup>7</sup> According to Foucault 'the objects of discourse' are not things themselves, but the relations that they create, and the aim of these relations, is 'to define these objects without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to body of rules that enable them to form objects of discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance'.<sup>8</sup>

While university systems tend to work on centralizing principles rather than principles of participatory engagement (beyond utilization of social media), practice continuously creates relations and can offer easily a medley of disciplines within its projects to support evolution of new discursive tendencies. Such discursive tendencies are linked to the demands of a market that moves fast, compared to universities that are not equipped institutionally to address quick changes and interdisciplinary mixing. It is not surprising therefore that the new objects of formation seem to be evolving from practice at present and are configuring new spatial relationships.<sup>9</sup> (Ch 18\_Fig 1)

But of course, the crisis of architecture could be seen as a spatial as well as a historical problem. According to Wigley, crisis should be seen as 'the moment [when] the threat is not just inside the space but is actually an extreme challenge to the space itself'. For him, crisis 'always appears as the failure of a spatial system, a failure of architecture'. In contrast to

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 44-5.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 46-8.

<sup>9</sup> "Makerversity" is a novel object located in Somerset House in London that offers elastic relationship between project and the studio space. A work space with the access to a range of fabrication and prototyping tools, spaces, event and learning facilities it supports 'emerging practice, learning and employability opportunities for young people and kick-start the Third Industrial Revolution in the heart of London'. Accessed September 2014 <http://makerversity.co.uk/what/>.

emergency, crisis is beyond control and uncontained: 'an emergency is a threat within a system [while] crisis is a threat to the whole system'.<sup>10</sup> Farshid Moussavi suggests that the spatial and pedagogical relationship creates a 'specific kind of habitus which influences the kind of character students take on in future practice'.<sup>11</sup> In terms of pedagogical experiments, the space in which architecture is taught can potentially help support creation of a particular educational culture that can be productive in a crisis: a culture that can potentially temporarily 'contain' it, establish the limits of such education and make productive use of such educational environment. (Ch 18\_Fig. 2)

Considered in its most basic terms, architecture always needs a project to establish its limits, and it needs a space to work in for such a project. The idea of the 'project' is important, as not only is the design project a common ground of operation and collaboration, but also a historical, critical or interdisciplinary entity that establishes the rules and relations for the emergence of new discursive formations. Whether it is tectonic, critical or representational, the project has the potential to make a number of relations both inside and outside of education, profession and research. Located in the studio, the project is an *event in space*, and the studio is a *spatial solution for the project to operate*. Evoking ideas of exchange, workshop, seminar, debate, discussion, making, working across media, collaboration and experimentation the studio is an image of creative cooperative working in which the outcome – the architectural design and the educational benefit – is 'greatly superior to that which could be achieved by the individual student working alone'.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, perhaps it is the combination of both project and studio that opens up possibilities to establish the limits of discourse and create new discursive formations, as well as generating the formation of objects in Foucault's terms. The project can be seen as a limit to architecture and its intention. The studio is a space in which architectural intention is materialized before being taken off to site. However, the relationship between the two is complex. One is a discursive formation (project) and the other is the discursive object (space). While both can operate in conjunction spatially, they often operate in disjunction

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Wigley, "Space in Crisis".

<sup>11</sup> Farshid Moussavi, "School buildings produce culture" in *The Architectural Review*, OCTOBER 2012, 1388. VOLUME CCXXXII.

<sup>12</sup> QAA Subject Benchmark for Architecture, 13.

temporally. Elastic configurations can occur through different modes of working within a project and different modes of spatial organization within the studio. It is exactly in crisis that an architecturally grounded project and studio are both useful tools for new conceptions of pedagogy, and in need of new forms of space.

*Ivana Wingham is an architect and academic. She is Head of Architecture Programme at Brighton University, UK. She completed her undergraduate studies in Architecture at the University of Belgrade, Serbia, moved to UK and continued her postgraduate studies at the Architectural Association, became registered architect and completed her Ph.D. at the Bartlett School of Architecture UCL, London. Her book *Mobility of the Line: Art, Architecture Design* published by Birkhäuser (2013) is a celebration of the manifold aspects of line, using unique examples from architecture, design and art practices that operate at the disciplinary boundaries.*