

CRITIC GOES HOME. THOUGHT AS A TOOL IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

"Architectural Critique" is a subject of the Master's Degree in Architecture (MUA) at the School of Architecture of the University of A Coruña (ETSAC). Fernando Agrasar and Luz Paz Agras, the professors responsible for the course, orient its contents towards the development of critical judgment skills, with a clearly practical approach. The course has been taught since the academic year 2018-2019.

In the 2020-21 academic year, the topics of the Final Year Project (TFM of the MUA) were various residential programmes in Santiago de Compostela. The main practice of the course focused on the elaboration of a critical essay on a contemporary housing programme built in Galicia.

The different critical analyses were summarised and recorded to create a video in which a wide range of issues were condensed, including environmental, compositional, functional, social, economic, and technical aspects.

This video was used as the basis for the debate, organised in a public session held at NORMAL (the University's cultural space and exhibition hall). The event was entitled: " Living today in Galicia: Critical Considerations". Fernanda Canales (CDMX) and Ricardo Carvalho (Lisbon) together with the professors of the subject composed the table in which questions about contemporary inhabiting were discussed, following the

critical considerations included in the video of our students. After the round of interventions, a debate was opened among the participants.). This session, broadcast by streaming, condensed the contents of the course and fulfilled its academic objectives of offering students a reflective and critical position from which to develop their architectural project.

KEYWORDS

Architectural critique; critical thinking; architectural composition; contemporary housing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2020-21 academic year took place in a pandemic situation in which classes were face-to-face, but security protocols were applied and travel was restricted. The syllabus of the subject 'Architectural Critique' of the Master's Degree in Architecture, which had begun to be taught in the 2018-19 academic year, proposes content referring to the analysis of texts and the theoretical proposals of various authors, from the mid-20th century to the present day. These topics are presented throughout the course, while three practical tasks are developed, sequenced in terms of their difficulty, which consist of writing a critical essay on a specific work that students must document and visit.

The subject covers the following topics:

1 Conceptos básicos: A crítica como mecanismo de aprendizaxe; o ensaio crítico; os obxectivos da crítica; as orixes da crítica; o papel contemporáneo da crítica; as ferramentas da crítica de arquitectura. 2 As aportacións de Alöis Riegl: a crítica formalista. 3 As aportacións de Benedetto Croce: a artisticidade e a espiritualidade da arquitectura. 4 As aportacións de Bruno Zevi: a caracterización do espazo e a defensa da heterodoxia. 5 As aportacións de Reyner Banham: os valores tecnolóxicos. 6 As aportacións de Erwin Panofsky: a xénese das formas artísticas. 7 As aportacións de Rudolf Wittkower: a relación entre as formas artísticas e a cultura. 8 As aportacións de Ernesto Nathan Rogers: tradición, historia e monumento. 9 As aportacións de Christian Norberg-Schulz: o carácter existencial do espazo. 10 As aportacións de Walter Benjamín: a crítica marxista á modernidade. 11 As aportacións de Gaston Bachelard: a crítica fenomenolóxica. 12 As aportacións de Manfredo Tafuri: crítica e ideoloxía. 13 As aportacións de Collin Rowe: a análise da forma. 14 As aportacións de Rem Koolhaas: a reflexión dende a creación. 15 Conclusións: a aprendizaxe arquitectónica a través da crítica.

The choice of the buildings and environments in which the internships are carried out is linked to the theme of the Final Degree Project, which is prepared during the Master's degree. In the course to which we refer, the project themes were focused on various residential programmes in Santiago de Compostela. Consequently, the architectures on which it is proposed to write a critical essay develop residential programmes of different characteristics, all of which are in Galicia and are contemporary works. The case studies selected include interventions

in rural and urban settings and new builds and refurbishments, encouraging a variety of circumstances for the analysis.

This work is carried out as a third practical project, to be delivered at the end of the term and for which the following statement is provided:

1.1. Architectural critique 2020-21. Practical Project 3

After the two previous practices, we will tackle a series of critical essays on sixteen residential architectural projects, with different design programmes. The common link between all of them is their contemporary nature and the fact that they were built in Galicia.

Each group is assigned one of these works with the task of writing a critical essay on it. The steps to be followed for the practical work and its timetable will be as follows:

1. Architectural DOCUMENTATION of the work (surroundings, plans, photographs, details, ...)
2. Evaluative documentation on the piece (awards, news, specialised reviews, testimonials, ...).
3. Preparation of a SCRIPT with the fundamental ideas that structure the critical essay, supervised by the lecturers of the subject.
4. Preparation of a CRITICAL ESSAY on the building studied.
5. Preparation of a short EXHIBITION with graphic material and the main ideas developed.
6. The delivery of the work (in Moodle) will be done on the day set for the exam of the subject (January 19) before 10 am. With the summary of each paper a video will be prepared, which will be the fundamental element on which a round table on CONTEMPORARY RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN GALICIA will be organised. This round table will be held in February-March 2021.

1.2. List of works (Fig. 1):

- 1 Housing for gypsies in Campañó, Poio, Pontevedra, César Portela and Pascuala Campos, 1970.
- 2 Housing and facilities in Montecelo, Paderne, Paderne, Manolo Gallego, 1984-1989
- 3 Cabins in Broña, Outes, Salgado e Liñares, 2015
- 4 Residence for students on the Vigo Campus. Alfonso Penela, 2000-2002.
- 5 Bela Fisterra Hotel. Creus and Carrasco, 2019
- 6 Housing cooperative in Galeras-Entrerriós, Santiago, Carbajo Barrios, 2016.
- 7 Housing, facilities and car park in Ourense, Vier Arquitectos 2002-2007
- 8 Pilgrims' hostel in Vilalba, C. E Meijide and J. V. Meijide, 1999
- 9 Housing in Caramoniña, Santiago, Víctor López Coteló 2001-2009
- 10 Residential day centre in Redondela Santos-Martínez 2008-2012.
- 11 9 Public social housing in Mugar dos, Jorge Salgado 2007-2011.
- 12 43 Homes for young and old people and day centre in Ferrol, Ábalo Alonso arquitectos, 2007-2010.
- 13 Refurbishment of building in Galera street in A Coruña, Creus e Carrasco.
- 14 Rural tourism house and flats in Aldán. Alfonso Penela, 2008
- 15 Refurbishment of 7 buildings for 9 homes and a commercial premises in Vigo. Cendón-Vázquez architects, 2014.
- 16 Prototypes of housing-containers in Santiago, R. Novio and C. Taboada 2006

Assignments are made for groups of a maximum of three students, groups of two or even individuals.

1.3. Schedule

30/11/2020: Presentation of Practical Project 3

21/12/2020: First review of proposals for exercises for Practical Project 3

28/12/2020: Tutorials for Practical Project

19/01/2021: Handing in of papers at the scheduled time for the ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM exam and preparation of the video recording of the round table on CONTEMPORARY RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN GALICIA..

02-03/2021: Celebration of the round table LIVING IN GALICIA TODAY: CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

The following organisational chart is proposed: Work (To be delivered 19 January before 10:00h):

- Title page: Title of the case study + name of the group members
- Referenced images
- Length of text, minimum 2,000 words
- Text structure with headings
- Notes and bibliographical references in footnotes

Presentation for recording of the video (To be delivered 19 January before 10:00h)

- Maximum of 10 images in PowerPoint format
- First standardised screen with template uploaded in Moodle



Figure 1. Assembly of the case studies

Recording of the video (during the week from 25 to 29 January, 2021)

- The maximum duration will be a maximum of 10 images timed at 20 sec/each.
- It is recommended to rehearse and coordinate the exhibition before the recording session.
- The recording will take place in the auditorium of the University School of Architecture.

This work, the results of which can be jointly evaluated in the public session " Living today in Galicia. Critical considerations", is the central didactic tool that organises the course, the methodology and results of which are presented in this text.

2.CRITIQUE AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Critical appraisal is frankly diminished in contemporary architectural culture. Powerful images and unjustified judgements have brought reasoned, authoritative and complex reflection to the brink of extinction. With honourable exceptions, quality critical essays are no longer abundant in the most prestigious periodicals, nor in specialised publications, nor in the complex panorama of digital publications dedicated to contemporary architecture. Descriptive reviews and the always self-interested opinion of the authors themselves have replaced the critical exercise as it was understood until a few decades ago.

This panorama has contributed to the fact that architecture students all over the world base their references and interests on the architectures included in the syllabus, on those referred to tangentially in classes and on those published without the necessary deliberation.

The effort involved in visiting a building, documenting it, researching it and writing a critical essay on it, in a guided and didactic way, has an undeniable educational potential. The progress of this critical exercise is

presented in class, during the course of its elaboration, to be debated among all the students and guided by the teaching staff. By sequencing the critical reflections throughout the months of the course, it is possible to see remarkable progress.

In the first approaches, the difficulties encountered by students in this task are evident. The considerations on the case studies analysed begin by being fundamentally descriptive, based on the documentation obtained in physical or online publications. In most cases, the students contact the studios that are the authors of the projects and, in the first stages of the work, they reproduce what they are told about the circumstances of the project, their approaches, etc., without any trace of a critical perspective.

The visit to the building is a decisive step in the work, as it provides the students with their own experience in the perception of architecture, which entails the first approach from their own perspective, although in this case, the visit was not possible in all cases due to the pandemic. As the work progresses, the students incorporate critical reflections that the teachers intentionally introduce in the lectures or in the specific corrections of the practical classes. In some cases, they produce analytical graphic material on the case studies, which allows, on the one hand, a more in-depth knowledge of the architectures analysed and, on the other, to have explanatory images to accompany the critical reflections.

Through the pooling sessions of the examples studied, concepts such as the role of collective housing in community building emerged in the Paderne project by Manuel Gallego; housing as a social asset in the gypsy settlement in Poio by César Portela and Pascuala Campos (Fig. 2); or the questioning of the accepted idea of "sustainability" in the Cabañas de Broña by Salgado Liñares (Fig. 3), recent winner of the National Architecture Prize.



Figure 2. Housing for gypsies in Campañó, Poio, Pontevedra, César Portela and Pascuala Campos, 1970.



Figure 3. Cabins in Broña, Outes, Salgado e Liñares, 2015

Residential projects in historical contexts provide reflections on the relevance of common and public spaces, due to their position in compromised fabrics, the prominence of the residential building in a historical fabric, etc. Examples such as the Galeras-Entrerrios Cooperative by Carbajo Barrios or the Caramoniña apartments by López Cotelo, which are part of the historic fabric of Santiago, the work of Vier Arquitectos in Ourense, or the work of Calle Galera by Creus y Carrasco, in A Coruña. The refurbishment of existing pieces is also present in the case studies, such as the intervention by Cendón-Vázquez, in Vigo, or the Rural Tourism House in Aldán, by Alfonso Penela (Fig. 4).

The variety of examples for which a critical interpretation is proposed allows for a broad consideration of residential typologies, which requires the consideration of the perspective of the diversity of users, with the singularities of each of these groups. From the temporary tourist accommodation of the Hotel Bela Fisterra by Creus and Carrasco, or the Pilgrims' Hostel in Vilalba, by Carlos and Jorge Meijie, to the specificity of the housing for elderly people of the Residential Day Centre in Redondela, by Santos-Martínez (Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Rural tourism house and flats in Aldán, Alfonso Penela, 2008



Figure 5. Residential day centre in Redondela, Santos-Martínez, 2008-12

3. CRITIQUE AS A DESIGN TOOL

When preparing a critical analysis, the students have to choose the aspects on which their analysis should focus, such as functional, social, economic, contextual, technical or formal aspects.

It should be remembered that, at the same time, a housing project is being developed in the workshop. The connection between the classes and the work in Criticism and in the Master's Thesis Workshop (TFM) is sought, but not in a directed way. We believe that this "discovery" must be personal and spontaneous in order to obtain optimum results. For this purpose, a brief exercise is carried out in the middle of the course, in which the advances of the basic projects that are being developed are intertwined, so that each one of them carries out a critical exercise on the architectural proposal of a colleague.

The project is no longer the search for a solution to a series of pragmatic problems, such as slopes, connections with the road, or the orientation and views of the rooms. Critical reflection places the essential intentions and values before other questions, for which the project's own theoretical approach, if it is solid and well-founded, will offer a solution.

The critical evaluations of these studied interventions provide a series of reflections that the students cannot see as recipes, as they are diverse cases, but which they discuss in parallel to the Master's Thesis. The proposals they develop are located on the edge of the historic centre of Santiago, in a consolidated area with cobbled streets and a large park, making decisions on the rehabilitation of the existing structures. These critical interpretations of examples built on consolidated plots or rehabilitation interventions, raise questions about intervention criteria and approaches that are essential as tools in the design process. In the same sense, the diversity

of typologies that form part of the case studies encourages specific approaches in the process of designing for a community and determining the ways of living that this architecture implies.

Kindling a critical perspective in the students has allowed us to observe how these reflections were passed on to their design approaches. Aspects such as the links with the place, the generation of public space and common spaces, the determination of residential typologies according to the users, etc., began to emerge in the accounts of their projects. These questions allow them to move away from the uncritical resolution of domestic spaces according to normative rigidity or strict technical resolution, enriching the project and providing more coherent solutions.

3.1. Reflecting, confronting, organising, presenting and convincing

1. The process in which students have to develop their critical work goes through the following stages:
2. Reflecting on a real project, visiting it, studying its design and the existing publications on it. Sometimes also by meeting and interviewing the authors. This involves understanding the key issues that underpin the theoretical framework that supports the building to be studied.
3. Confronting, with other study processes on contemporary buildings, the variety of interests and theoretical orientations. In the first presentations in class, decisions are made about which basic questions are dominant in each of the architectures: context, social problems, new forms of inhabiting, ... The coincidences and divergences are of interest at the moment when the first decisions are being made about their own project.
4. Organising a critical text involves choosing the issues to be addressed and prioritising them, as well as understanding

that positive and negative evaluations are intertwined.

5. Presenting the work in progress and, eventually completed, requires a rare task for our students, who have not been trained in debate and public presentation in primary and secondary education and, of course, the university has not solved this deficiency. The effort has a notable educational value, since, in the practice of architecture, presenting an idea so that it can be carried out always involves these processes.
6. Convincing is undoubtedly a consequence of a good critical analysis. The presentation of considerations and perspectives on an architectural work must be based on a well-founded reflection, which can only be refuted with arguments of the same level of rigour and solidity. This final objective is necessary for writing a critical essay and essential for justifying architectural decisions whose results will require important resources and will condition the lives of their users.

3.2 Evaluation of an experience

The presentations of the practices carried out by the students were recorded () and used as base material for the organisation of a critical session that took place at the NORMAL, in the exhibition space of the University of A Coruña, on 25 May 2021, both in person and online. The students were invited to this event, as well as the authors of the works studied, and it was open to a wide audience, in order to visualize the educational experience.

During the event "Living in Galicia Toda: Critical Considerations", the Mexican architect Fernanda Canales (Fig. 6) and the Portuguese architect Ricardo Carvalho (Fig. 7) participated from New York and Lisbon, respectively, discussing the singularities of their contexts in relation to contemporary

habitation and, considering the Galician case from the viewing of the students' presentations and in conversation with the course lecturers.

The discussion was open to the public, both in the NORMAL and online, and a series of conclusions about contemporary living emerged that highlighted a number of universal themes and some contextual singularities.

In terms of the most relevant aspects that were repeated in all the contexts, the most outstanding one was the relevance of common spaces, where relationships of coexistence and collaboration are forged, complemented by the relationship between domestic space and public space. Another of the ideas that took centre stage in the debate was the need to make domestic spaces more flexible. The diversity of family and cohabitation units implies the need to adapt spaces to different ways of life, an idea that the recent pandemic has helped to consolidate. In addition to this, sustainable planning is a contemporary condition in all areas: social and political, construction, energy saving, etc.

This international event added value to the work carried out by the students, disseminating it and allowing new critical interpretations to be built on it from external perspectives.

In the successive courses of the subject, this approach of linking critical analysis and project tool is continued, selecting, in each case, the case studies in relation to the proposals for the Master's Thesis project to be completed by these students. The selection criteria are also maintained, being examples of contemporary architecture in Galicia, visitable, and through which a critical reading allows reflection on the Master's thesis project

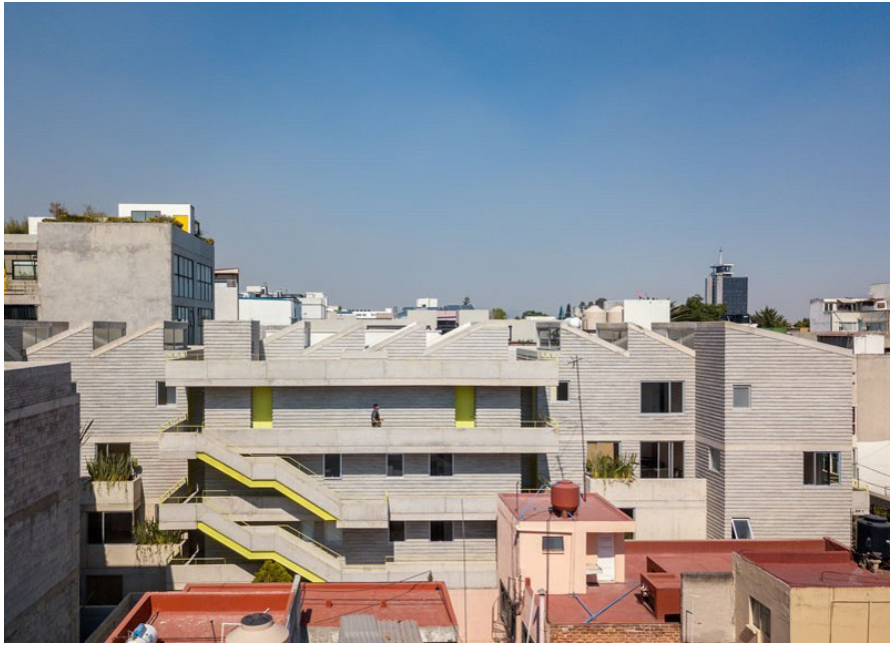


Figure 6. Vecindad Monte Albán, Ciudad de México, Fernanda Canales, 2020



Figure 7. OR12: 2 Housing Blocks, Lisbon, Ricardo Carvalho, 2020-25