Revising Practice:

Strategies and attitudes for architecture in the next century.
By Edwin Gardner

Stan Allen's endeavor in reformulating architectural practice and theory in his book "Practice, Architecture, Technique and Representation"[1] is not a solo undertaking. In recent years a lot of academics in the field of architecture have done the same. All trying to define a new way of practicing architecture and theory, all slightly different but with many similarities in the direction where the look for answers. This search for the definition of contemporary and future architectural practice is part of a bigger debate. A debate in the United States around notions such as 'post-critical'[2] and 'projective practice' . The American debate however seems to be extremely geared towards a reaction against the architecture and theory of Peter Eisenman. Although the debate is colored with this sort of motives it persists to be a very interesting developments and appears to be putting forward a fruitful strategy for architectural practice for the 21st century.

In this essay I would like to put Stan Allen's "Introduction, Practice vs, Project" from the book "Practice, Architecture, Technique and Representation" [3] in context of this debate, mainly through the article "Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism" [4]. This article is much more specifically taking position against the a generation embodied by the work of Peter Eisenman and K. Michael Hays and has a lot of overlaps in formulating the alternative that the new generation (here personified by Stan Allen, Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting) is proposing to counter the dominant model so far (I have to note that this debate and generation conflict is mostly taking place within the American academia). But both writings leave one question unanswered: "What about architectural critique?" The issue of critique was very central in the work of Eisenman and Hays and an entire group of architects and writers of their generation. All taking 'a' critical stance towards society, capitalism and other societal structures. But how will this notion of critique be part of the formulation of architectural practice for the next century.

One of the issues that stands at the root of this debate is the troublesome relationship between architectural practice and theory. Allen does a very good job explaining how these entities are positioned towards one and other and why they cause a problem.
"Theory and practice are (...) equally rule-bound: theory devoted to the production of rules, practice relegated to the implementation of those same rules (...) Theory's promise is to make up for what practice lacks: to confer unity on the disparate procedures of design and construction." [5] These quotes summarize the situation as is predominantly seen and already gives us a clue about what the problem is. "In this view, theory tends to envelope and protect practice, while practice excuses theory from the obligation to engage reality. Design is reduced to the implementation of rules set down elsewhere.(...) Theory imposes regulated ideological

criteria over the undisciplined heterogeneity of the real, while the unstated assumptions of conventional practice enforce known solutions and safe repetitions. In both cases, small differences accumulate, but never add up to make a difference." [6]

Theory and practice are captured by one and other and in this situation both incapable of engaging reality, this is a sad and dumb situation according to Allen. This does not mean; let's get rid of one of them to liberate the other. Allen proposes a revision of both definitions. So he reformulates practice as well as theory as 'material practice' and 'hermeneutic practice'. Two practices that work more closely together in engaging reality. Hermeneutic practice understands the present through analyzing the past and material practice analyses the present "in order to project transformations into the future" [7]. In this new relationship, architecture is not the object of theory and architecture does not need theory as legitimation for defining the form in which it manifests itself. "What is proposed instead is a notion of practice flexible enough to engage the complexity of the real, yet sufficiently secure in its own technical and conceptual bases to go beyond the simple reflection of the real as given" [8]

To understand what exactly is meant by these terms hermeneutic and material practice it is perhaps more interesting if we compare them with a third term 'projective practice' which aims at a very similar redefinition of practice and places these 'redefinitions' in the context of the current debate described earlier. The term 'projective' is put forward in the article 'Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism' by Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting. When Somol & Whiting introduce the term 'projective'. They also address the problem of the theory-practice distinction but in a far more indirect way, in their argument these are still very much intertwined. The article starts off with the heading "from critical to projective". This needs some further explanation. The notion of 'critical' to which is referred in this article originates from how K. Michael Hays uses it in his article "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form". In this article Hays uses the architecture of Mies van der Rohe as a paradigm to explain how through dialectics architecture can occupy a in between status between two contradicting positions. Architecture can do this through using its autonomy, detaching itself from reality but at the same time reflecting it. "For Hays, Mies' architecture situates itself 'between the efficient representation of preexisting cultural values and the wholly detached autonomy of an abstract formal system.' [9] This status of being in the world yet resistant to it is attained by the way the architectural object materially reflects its specific temporal and spatial context, as well as the way it serves as trace of its productive systems." [10]

In this way ,Hays explains, Mies' architecture can be critical, because it has positioned itself at the necessary distance to be critical through architectural means of its materiality through which it can reflect on contemporary reality. Even though architecture is produced by reality and the way a building is built is a trace of that reality, autonomy is a form of resistance to this reality. This piece of theory and the formulation of 'critical architecture' had such an influence that "What for Hays was then an exceptional practice, has now been rendered an everyday fact of life." [11] This is the role of theory which Allen is referring to: "The enlightened discourse of theory (scientific, and generaliazable) is contrasted to the mechanical techniques

of practice. Today this view persists in the form of a mandate for 'critical' practices that would hold the individual instances of practice accountable to ideological criteria." [12] Practice held prisoner by criteria of a theory that refuses to fully engage reality and instead detaches itself from reality through retreating into formalistic autonomy, an almost autistic architecture.

Both Somol & Whiting as Allen are not content with this state of affairs. And propose a more open, flexible approach to reality through an architectural practice that is confident in its own modes of operation and intrinsic disciplinary knowledge. In contrast to architectural autonomy, Somol & Whiting state: "If critical dialectics established architecture's autonomy as a means of defining architecture's field of discipline, a Doppler architecture acknowledges the adaptive synthesis of architecture's many contingencies. Rather than isolating a singular autonomy, the Doppler focuses upon the effect and exchanges of architecture's inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economics, etc." [13] With the 'Doppler effect' notion Somol & Whiting want to counter the rigid position of architecture positioned 'in between' the two oppositions (culture and form) that constitute a dialectical framework. In the Doppler situation the (op)positions are constantly moving and changing with a relative velocity to one and other. This reflects a much more flexible and larger space for architecture to maneuver in and to choose it's own position at any instance. "More significantly, practice is not a static construct, but is defined precisely by its movements and trajectories. There is no theory, there is no practice. There are only practices, which consist in action and agency. They unfold in time, and their repetitions are never identical. It is for this reason that the 'know-how' of practice (whether of writing or design) is a continual source of innovation and change." [14] The hard distinction between a theory that instructs how a practice should operate have disappeared in this formulation, they are now equally important practices, existing next to each other and informing each other. "Ironically, practice (usually assumed unproblematically identified with reality) will discover new uses for theory only as it moves closer to the complex and problematic character of the real itself." [15]

The definition of architectural practice might now seem to be one with a very vague outline. But Allen and Somol & Whiting also sketch a new perimeter for architectural practice. "Architecture's limits are understood pragmatically –as resource and an opportunity- and not a defining boundary. The practitioner looks for performative multiplicities in the interplay between an open catalog of procedures and a stubbornly indifferent reality." [16] "A projective architecture does not make a claim for expertise outside the field of architecture nor does it limit its field of expertise to an absolute definition of architecture. Design is what keeps architecture from slipping into a cloud of heterogeneity. It delineates the fluctuating borders of architecture's disciplinarity and expertise. So when architects engage topics that are seemingly outside of architecture's historically-defined scope –questions of economics or civic politics, for example- they don't engage those topics as experts on economics or civic politics but, rather as experts on design and how design may affect economics or politics. They

engage these other fields as experts on design's relationship to those other disciplines, rather than as critics." [17] The limits of architecture are not clearly defined in both quotes, but what is very clear is that the practice and field of architecture is defined from within the discipline itself. From a 'historically-defined' body of knowledge and an 'open catalog of procedures' new knowledge and procedures will emerge, when architectural practice is confronted with the real. But what is overseen here is that the real imposes limits on architecture as well. Liberating architectural discourse of Marxists rhetorics and the architecture as an a priori critical practice is one thing. But shaping this 'new' practice from the inherent knowledge of the discipline is something else, and a paramount question. The argument of returning to the body of knowledge intrinsic to the architectural discipline can be interpreted in two very different ways. One is a revaluation of the craft of making buildings and spaces, the effects of materiality , tactility and spatial atmospheres. The other is regarding the operations in architectural practice abstractly, in ways of architectural thinking, design tools and strategies. These operation can be applied on any problem and the product of the process can be anything, so not necessary a building or a spatial design. Architectural or design thinking as a body of knowledge and a set of tools and operation which can address a multitude of issues. But history teaches us that the nuance of both paradigms existing next to each other under the flag of 'architecture' is unlikely.

But what about critique? Critique on architecture's position society and how it should or should not operate in this relationship? The 'critical practices' very specifically addressed the problems of the relations and structures in contemporary society. With the negating autonomy of Eisenman as prime example of the American version of 'Critical'. How would a projective or material practice address these issues of societal criticism? Somol & Whiting leave this question open ended with their closing statement : "Setting out this projective program does not necessarily entail a capitulation to market forces, but actually respects or reorganizes multiple economies, ecologies, information systems, and social groups." [18] Respecting reality seems like a very sensible thing to do, and a lot less naïve then believing in the critical strategies rendered capable of refusing or changing society. But the problem remains, if architecture doesn't take a certain distance, how can it be critical. How can you be truly critical of the systems of which you yourself are dependent on. Allen has maybe a more fruitful strategy to address this problem. In this arguments he uses the example of 'the walker in the city' used by De Certeau to illustrate his story how one can improvise with a present system, just like the geometric spaces of the city can not dictate the trajectory of the walker. "De Certeau describes a series of 'tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised.' [19] He has confidence that there will always exist fissures and cracks that provide openings for tactical reworkings. Making opportunistic use of these footholds, the creativity of everyday practice can often outwit the rigid structures of imposed order, or out-maneuver the weighty apparatus of institutional control" [20] Allen describes with the use of De Certeau how one can outwit the structures in which one is

embedded. The strategy proposed could be characterized as embedded critique, but it has to be said that this is a very different position and less credible to state critique from.

But the Marxist critical position is not feasible either from within architectural practice. The main problem with critique in our contemporary society is that it is largely internalized within our societal systems. Marxism always poses a critique on how the whole of capitalist society is organized, there are very few positions from where you can pose a credible critique like that and it has to be a position without any appearance of conflicting interests. The academic world has always been a haven for critical thinking like this. But architectural practice is deeply intertwined with all kinds of interests, and its even one the architect's many capacities to work with them in a smart way. Architecture is also a business, so practice as a vocation of academic critical thinking won't get any bread on the table, and even if it could your critique can never entirely credible, because your client pays for it. Critique in the Marxist sense as part of any business practice is problematic. But this doesn't directly mean that you capitulate to all market force. Everywhere in business there are ideals, principles and societal criticisms which drive enterprises. But this form of idealism which also has to be pragmatic and has to be commercially viable is aimed at concrete results and not at reflection on mankinds existential condition in our post-industrial globalized society.

This brings us back to the academia, the school for architecture. Where theoretical discourse has its real influence on practice by training the next generation of architects. In this sense the school is critical in how architects think about what architects and architecture should do and its meaning in society at large.

Here I would like to make a point. Architectural theory as teached in schools in general generates the image that architecture should be employed to intellectually reflect on the existential conditions of contemporary mankind, heavily drawing on ideas from philosophy. This together with the dogma of architects being artists creates the climate on architecture schools that the ideal architecture should be a high-cultural-intellectual-practice, with the architect as central author/artist or guru. Here I am missing a nuance in a way thinking which can engage reality more directly, instead of through intellectual culture production. The paradox of the architecture school is that is doesn't demystifies architectural design, but actually mystifies architectural design. The idea that architects are also entrepreneurs, which in my opinion is the most fruitful way to constitute new forms of practice and reinvent what architecture can do in engaging reality, seems to be an idea which is unable to enter the academic world and become an integral part in the thinking about architecture. In other words you could describe this again as problematic relation between the sphere of theory (being the school) and that of practice (being the office).

Nevertheless I think both texts of Allen and Somol & Whiting are signals that support the idea that theory and practice should work more closely as two equal but not similar practices. Theory and practice should formulate what architectures operations, tools are and together plot out a strategy to conquer new territories where 'architecture' can be applied by architects which see themselves as thinkers, designers and entrepreneurs.

1 Stan Allen, Practice: architecture, technique and representation, (London: Routledge, 2000)

2 'post critical' was one of the buzzwords at 'The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century' Conference held at Columbia University on the 28-19th of March 2003. Bernard Tschumi, Irene Cheng (editors), The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century, (New York, The Monacelli Press, 2003)

3 Stan Allen, Practice: architecture, technique and representation, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.13-25

4 Robert Somol & Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism", Perspecta 33, The Yale architectural Journal, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), pp.72-77

5 Stan Allen, Practice: architecture, technique and representation, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.15

6 Ibid.,pp.16

7 Ibid.,pp.18

8 Ibid.,pp. 16

9 K. Michael Hays, "Critical Architecure: Between Culture and Form", Perspecta 21, The Yale architectural Journal, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1984), pp.15

10 Robert Somol & Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism", Perspecta 33, The Yale architectural Journal, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), pp.74

11 Ibid.,pp.73 12 Stan Allen, Practice: architecture, technique and representation, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.15

13 Robert Somol & Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism", Perspecta 33, The Yale architectural Journal, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), pp.75

14 Stan Allen, Practice: architecture, technique and representation, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.17

15 Ibid., pp.17

16 Ibid., pp.18

17 Robert Somol & Sarah Whiting, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism", Perspecta 33, The Yale architectural Journal, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), pp.75

18 Ibid., pp.77

19 Michel de Certau, The Practices of Everyday Life, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.96

20 Stan Allen, Practice: architecture, technique and representation, (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.23