

Curiosity Detroit's Park(Ing) Is a Green Space First and Parking Lot S

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# Park(ing) Is a Green Space First and Parking Lot Second

Detroit's new landscape is a thoughtful mediation among beauty, ecology, and the car.

WORDS Stefan Novakovic  
PHOTOS Andrew Schwartz

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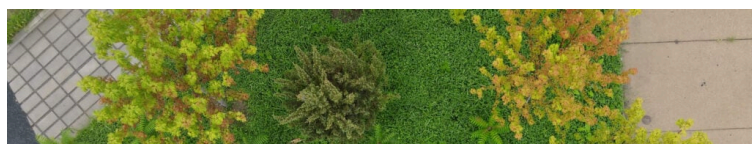
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**American landscape architect** and [D.I.R.T. Studio](#) founder [Julie Bargmann](#) describes PARK(ing), a 2,230-square-metre site in Detroit's Core City neighbourhood, as a green space first and a parking lot second. "Let's imagine that the whole thing is a crazy wild forest," she says, "and then you take your eraser and put in as many cars as necessary."



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In this case, that means parking spots for 28 vehicles — each one nestled among a dense thicket of native trees, grasses and flowers. Brought to life by local real estate development and property management company Prince Concepts and designed by Bargmann with Prince's in-house landscape designer Andrew Schwartz, the site melds greenery with permeable pavers and granite ground covers in a way that recalls the resilient pockets of nature found along railway tracks and sidewalks. "People come and eat lunch in the car just to enjoy the scenery," says Schwartz.



The site also serves cyclists with a corner bike rack.

Tall green berms mediate the soil conditions caused by buried refuse from previously demolished buildings while reducing stormwater impact and hiding parked cars from public view.

Atop a base of white clover, the lot's 78 trees comprise Blue Point juniper,

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But the project — which transforms a long-vacant lot — is much more than just a cosmetic intervention. Its precisely sloped berms and porous surfaces absorb and channel rainwater and melting snow, alleviating the risk of flooding. It's a stark contrast to most surface parking lots, which erase natural landscapes and exacerbate stormwater damage. As Bargmann notes, even when a typical lot does incorporate greenery, "the trees that go in are as manufactured as the cars."

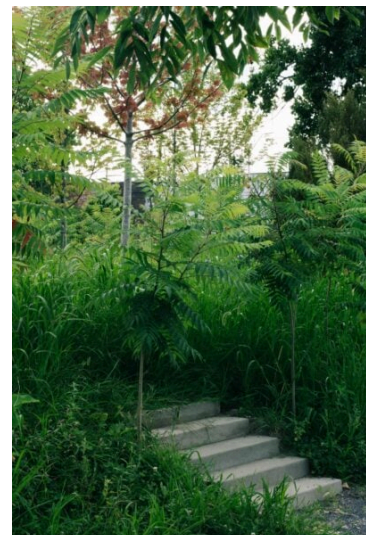


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A patio set by Hay forms a community gathering place in an especially bucolic corner away from the parking spots.

Of course, for all its organic graces, PARK(ing) is fundamentally still a piece of car infrastructure — and one that occupies a marquee corner site at the neighbourhood's busiest intersection. But as part of a community where driving is a fundamental way of life, it reflects a sensitivity to local needs and culture.





closer you look, the more those angular boundaries between paving and greenery blur — as if to suggest that, someday, all the sumacs and junipers might just reclaim a city built for the

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### The Jury Is Out: New Models of Assessment in Architectural Education

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WORDS Sydney Shilling



# The Jury Is Out: New Models of Assessment in Architectural Education

The crit has remained a fixture of architectural education since it originated at the École des Beaux-Arts. Is the practice still relevant today? Sydney Shilling explores emerging pedagogies that approach the crit through a critical lens.

WORDS Sydney Shilling

ART Jeannie Phan

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rise more times than I could count. It wasn't that I was pulling the all-nighters that have become practically synonymous with architecture school. On crit days, anticipation hung in the air like a dense fog; there was too much adrenaline for sleep. As I walked to the architecture building, the biting chill of the morning air would force me awake. Fuelled only by a coffee and muffin from the café downstairs, I'd make my way to the studio, where students weaved frantically between the rows of desks, putting the finishing touches on their models, searching for their elusive box of push-pins and gathering their drawings.

Whether it's called a crit, a jury or a review, the practice is almost universal: At the designated time, everyone falls into their role like a carefully choreographed performance. The presenting student pins their drawings to the wall and stands in front of them — and across from a seated row of critics comprising professors, practising architects and, occasionally, graduate students. Their peers sit behind the jury, watching and listening as the production unfolds. The presenter holds forth, the jury responds, rinse and repeat. As the winter semester comes to a close, architecture students around the world will experience a version of this exercise.

This storied tradition in architecture, design and art education originated at the famed École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, established in the early 19th century. Part of the École's atelier (or studio) pedagogical model, the crit emphasized design and drawing skills along with the elevated status of the studio instructor. Working under strict time deadlines, students were assessed by a panel of invited architects. The competitive evaluation process was private, cloaked in mystery; students devoted their time to the

for both the profession and pedagogy: Before the design-centred curriculum of the Beaux-Arts, architecture programs were developed in response to regional needs. Practical and structured, the new approach helped architecture to be recognized as an elite discipline and an academic sphere, rather than a trade like engineering. It soon became the gold standard in architectural education. The curriculum made its way to the U.S. when Beaux-Arts alumni were hired to teach at the country's first architecture schools in the late 19th century — and the rest is history.

**“We cannot pretend that the tutor who’s going to mark and ultimately judge the student’s work is there as a colleague. You have to be aware of your power and privilege.”**

The crit asks a lot of its participants. It requires students to summarize up to 12 weeks of work for an audience in five minutes or less, and to come prepared to receive feedback — publicly — with humility and gratitude (never mind the fact that they have barely slept in the days prior). It also impels members of the jury to instantaneously produce thoughtful, constructive commentary on work they have never seen before, to students they have not necessarily followed through their academic careers. Aiming to simulate the client–architect relationship, critics (often the colleagues and friends of the studio professor alongside well-known architects, with an unspoken hierarchy among them) admirably aspire to evaluate students as equals, yet there is often a complete disregard for the power imbalance at play.

“We cannot pretend that the tutor who’s going to mark and ultimately judge the student’s work

whose research centres around architecture pedagogy, and in particular, methods of feedback and assessment. It's not that professors have any malicious intent, he attests. It's more a lack of awareness. "You have to be aware of your power and privilege."

Architects undoubtedly offer valid, experience-based insight, yet the lack of multidisciplinary representation on panels perpetuates the assumption that practitioners are the only arbiters of good architecture, and this excludes valuable perspectives — of engineers, urbanists and other subject matter experts, and even the building's intended users — that better reflect the collaborative approach to real-world practice. Plus, their subjectivity becomes a double-edged sword when comments are made based on taste alone. "As architecture's native and relatively unique form of peer review, this practice is useful, but also remarkable in lacking a burden of proof for the claims of designers or critics," Ross Brady wrote in *Common Edge* in 2018. "If the expectation of empirical evidence for design decisions were introduced as the basis of a design crit, the cumulative effects of this change could improve the credibility of the entire discipline." The practice often allows no room for the critic's opinion to be questioned. This is especially problematic given that white male perspectives have been privileged in architectural academia since time immemorial — perspectives that no longer (and never did) reflect the diverse world we live in.

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approach has become more commonplace in recent years, the practice has a long-standing reputation as a de facto academic hazing. This, and the elusive connection between crits and their equally subjective grading outcomes, naturally puts students on the defensive; they become more focused on exonerating their scheme than absorbing feedback. And who can blame them? It is challenging to separate yourself from work you are so emotionally invested in, especially in a high-pressure setting, and it's a skill that is honed through life experience.

The name of the exercise, too, carries a lot of baggage, placing the focus on critique and constant improvement. Even the alternative term, "jury," implies the judgment of a project as good or bad. A review, as it is called in some schools, is a more accurate picture of what should be happening: an open dialogue that discusses the project's strengths and weaknesses. Yet this becomes challenging when there is a lack of consensus regarding what constitutes a successful project. "Whereas performance expectations might show up on rubrics for typical college students across the country, these tend to go largely unwritten in architecture school, the uncertainty functioning as a way to push architecture students to innovate, reimagine and carve out space for themselves within a competitive artistic field," authors Jake Rudin and Erin Pellegrino explain in their book, *Out of Architecture*.

On paper, the crit represents a rare and beautiful opportunity: a time dedicated solely to reflection on one's work. Receiving critiques has made me resilient — the practice has thickened my skin, if not left it slightly calloused. But I always found it ironic that a profession so enamoured with critique has rarely questioned the methods by

power dynamics and, according to some academics, they're overdue for a rethink.

**It goes without saying that the world looks**

much different than it did when architecture programs were formalized in the late 1800s. Yet the studio — and, by extension, the crit — have remained practically unchanged from their origins in the master-apprentice model. In recent years, the mental health issues percolating on university campuses have only been amplified in architecture schools. Flynn recalls the time he was approached by a counsellor at his university: "He said, 'I thought your program was huge, but you're a tiny program taking up a vast number of the issues we have, and they're all talking about the crit.'"

Following the Black Lives Matter movement, many institutions — schools of architecture included — also faced a social reckoning that forced them to address the ways their curricula and pedagogies perpetuated systemic racism. "Although Beaux-Arts traditions may have met the needs of 19th-century architecture students — a predominantly white, male and wealthy group — they are insufficient today. As a profession, architecture has a moral and ethical obligation to serve the public," says Rashida Ng, presidential associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Stuart Weitzman School of Design. "A deep assessment of the tacit social dynamics inherent within architectural curricula and pedagogies is warranted to address the current demands for justice in all aspects of civic life, including architecture."

The pandemic also forever changed the way we work. For nearly two years, schools were forced to adapt, to find ways to work outside the analog — studio classrooms, once buzzing with energy at nearly all hours, strewn with basswood and

contrary to popular opinion, nothing collapsed. Students and faculty embraced it.

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In the wake of all this change, Flynn co-wrote a book that imagines new possibilities for what the crit can be. In *Rethinking the Crit* (2023), he outlines a model for feedback delivery that he piloted beginning in 2017 (coincidentally, it laid the groundwork for online learning protocols that proved prescient when the pandemic forced architecture schools to temporarily shutter). “I always thought the crit is very two-dimensional. It’s one-size- fits-all,” he says. Instead, his approach tailors feedback to the current phase of the students’ projects. In the first stage of conceptualization, he groups classmates based on common interests for a roundtable discussion, fostering the co-creation of knowledge rather than the transmission of wisdom from professor to pupil, and flattening the hierarchy so inherent in the traditional crit format.

Then, students hand in their projects for written feedback and are given a day or two to reflect before having the opportunity to hand notes back to the professors. “By going back to a slower approach, the lecturers and the students don’t shoot from the hip,” he says. The next stage leverages online message boards to solicit continuous feedback from peers, professors and working professionals around the world, helping students maintain a steadier workflow and better time management, rather than the typical surges of work before the deadline, followed by a

shifting the tone from judgmental to celebratory. While critics seemingly offer little in the way of validation, Flynn's approach instead seeks to foster confidence in students, a vital but often neglected skill for success in practice. And by slowing the process down, it also creates more meaningful occasions for engagement: "In a crit, there's a kind of superficiality to the response. Much can be gained from studying things in more depth," he explains.

Flynn's work builds on decades of research that have called the Beaux-Arts model — and the crit itself — into question. Kathryn Anthony, a professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, was among the first to challenge what she refers to as the "sacred cow of architecture education." She has been examining the crit's efficacy — and relevance — since publishing the article "Private Reactions to Public Criticism" in the *Journal of Architectural Education* in 1987; her extensive research culminated in the book *Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio* (1991). It began with a provocation: "I put a call out in our Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture newsletter to find out what alternatives had been used at different schools. And much to my surprise, I heard from a number of faculty who explained what they did and how students reacted," she recalls. "Do I see them being implemented very often? Not a whole lot, and not often enough." Still, her work sparked a movement to establish studio culture as a criterion of the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) for evaluating all North American architecture schools.

Today, we are finally beginning to see the fruits of her labour. Anthony herself had success using digital tools for reviews during the pandemic. While Zoom wasn't a one-to-one replacement

student engagement. Anthony leveraged the chat function, requiring all students to leave multiple comments on each project, giving both positive feedback and notes for specific areas for improvement. Not only were students more engaged, they came away with written responses that they could apply to future projects. The permanence of public, documented feedback also provided a sense of accountability for professors: "Knowing that all the students would see everything that I wrote was a challenge," Anthony explains. The spatial set-up of Zoom, along with the encouragement of peer evaluation, democratized — and deinstitutionalized — the process, taking the professors off the pedestal and elevating student voices.

**"It's not the best tool for every project, and so we need more tools in our toolbox to prepare students to provide public leadership in questions of design to audiences that are not designers — to translate that information and then to create something that reflects the priorities of people who may not speak in a design language."**

Intent on not repeating the public shaming she experienced as a student during crits (and her overall student experience as a woman of colour), UPenn's Ng has also empowered her students to be active participants in the review process. She starts by involving them in planning the day from the very beginning, considering everything from the order of events to the layout of the room. "It's my responsibility to come with the proposal. But then I need to be prepared for students to say, 'Well, we don't like that idea,' and to ask questions, and to then revise it based on that feedback," she explains.

to the psychological safety Ng has fostered in her classroom. "It's only a problem when it becomes the default method of assessing students at benchmarks," says Ng. "But it's not the best tool for every project, and so we need more tools in our toolbox to prepare students to provide public leadership in questions of design to audiences that are not designers — to translate that information and then to create something that reflects the priorities of people who may not speak in a design language."

While students at first expressed skepticism at the idea of designing their own review, their response has been overwhelmingly positive. Ng's sessions most commonly take the form of intimate workshops, where people from other disciplines and members of the public with a relationship to the project — as well as architects and faculty — are invited to participate. In fall 2022, for instance, her studio collaborated with a community land trust. "I want to structure conversations and feedback that don't reinforce the notion that architects are the ones that decide what the best architecture is," she says. "We make buildings for people, and most of the people that use buildings aren't architects, right? So, shouldn't we be incorporating their ideas about their neighbourhood or the city or a building that they might occupy?"

Guests are invited not only to provide constructive commentary but to roll up their sleeves, get to work and sketch alternatives. Instead of the process taking the whole day, causing students and faculty to lose focus, it takes a few hours.

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For David Fortin, a Métis architect and professor at the University of Waterloo, the environment in which the crit takes place is of paramount importance. His vision for a rethink of the atelier or studio model is called "the design lodge"; it is a space rooted in collective spirit and Indigenous ways of knowing. "In the studios that I've worked with — particularly with Indigenous communities, but also other projects — we focus on working with our primary contacts within the community and making sure that we're understanding what they want and listening. A foundational part of how I teach studio is that architects must be good listeners first and foremost," he explains. His studios, then, emphasize teamwork, encouraging students to play to their strengths while contributing to the whole. He's also experimented with student-led reviews, which create spaces for open dialogue, even if that means disagreeing with the instructor.

He begins each semester with a sharing circle. "It shows that somebody cares about who you are as a person, not just your work. Often, we're taught in school that your work has to stand on its own so that if you're not there, it shouldn't matter who you are. But from an Indigenous perspective, who you are is so important. Your ancestors speak through you," he explains. He developed this approach at the McEwen School of Architecture, where he assembled panels of solely Indigenous architects for reviews, including an elder and two community members. The crit followed Indigenous protocols, with the elder being the first to speak. "That was quite interesting, because she's not a trained architect; you would not typically, in an architecture school,

almost an attack on a student's self-worth. And we really don't see that when we are in an environment where elders are leading the conversations."

**Rethinking the crit alone won't fix the problems** in architectural academia. At the curriculum level, the hyper-focus on studio perpetuates the misconception that design is the only valid career path. The studio environment itself often normalizes the unhealthy culture of overwork that pervades in practice, fostering competition instead of collaboration. Academic elitism and unnecessary use of jargon often lead students to spend more time decoding their professor's "riddles" than on productive work. And the examples we hold up as good architecture are still predominantly Eurocentric, idolizing starchitects and sustaining the myth of the lone genius without acknowledging the invisible labour behind them. The list goes on. Despite its shortcomings, the crit is still the predominant form of student evaluation in architecture programs. In a conducive setting, it works — but we need to ensure the right people have a seat at the table. And while it has historically been the main vehicle of feedback delivery in architectural education, it shouldn't be the only method in play.

**"We are a creative field; we're constantly innovating in terms of materials, space and form, and even program. That's what we're educated to do. So we need to reorient that back to our curriculum design."**

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As for whether Flynn's model represents a mainstay of assessment in architectural education, the future will tell. But by questioning the crit's efficacy, he has created space for a debate to begin. "The book is not a polemic. It's not saying that we all unite behind this. There is a spectrum of views, and the book is about trying to get people to talk about it, find what they think is the right approach and encourage more voices to get involved in this discussion," says Flynn. "There's a growing awareness that if you're doing something that's having this impact on students, you have to be pretty sure why you're doing it. And myself, I'm not convinced."

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