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### Original Research Article

## Rereading the Concept of “Critical Architecture” based on the thoughts of Michael Hays and Jane Rendell\*

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** The concept of “critical architecture” emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional definitions of “architecture” as either a “cultural instrument” or an “autonomous form.” It seeks to offer a more comprehensive and reflective perspective. Initially introduced by Michael Hays in 1984 and later redefined by Jane Rendell in 2007, this concept has evolved over time. However, the various dimensions of its relationship with architectural criticism, as well as its potential to contribute to social and cultural transformation, still require thorough examination and redefinition.

**Research objective:** This study aims to investigate the theoretical foundations that have influenced the formation of the concept of “critical architecture,” to offer a comprehensive definition of it, and to analyze its relationship with the concept of “architectural criticism.”

**Research method:** This article pursues its objective by examining the concept of “critical architecture” with a focus on the theories of Michael Hays and Jane Rendell, two prominent thinkers and theorists in the field of architecture. The research strategy employs “content analysis” and “textual interpretation,” while the method adopted is “documentary analysis.” To this end, the original texts and articles of these two theorists have been studied, and their approaches to key concepts such as “culture,” “form,” “design,” and “criticism” have been analyzed and compared.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study indicate that “critical architecture” draws on profound theoretical roots grounded in the philosophical discourse of “critical theory.” Hays defines “critical architecture” within a space between “culture” and “form,” where resistant and oppositional forms enable the critique of dominant ideologies. Rendell, on the other hand, conceptualizes it as an “interdisciplinary” process that dissolves traditional boundaries between “design” and “criticism,” transforming them into forms of “critical practice.” The study concludes that “critical architecture” can serve as a tool for social critique and transformation, providing a framework to rethink dominant values and ideologies within the context of architecture.

**Keywords:** *Critical Architecture, Architectural Criticism, Critical Theory, Michael Hays, Jane Rendell.*

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## Introduction and Problem Statement

Architecture has always reflected the culture, ideologies, and social values of its time (Melone & Borgo, 2020, 334). Yet, amidst the sociocultural complexities of the present day, a pivotal question emerges: should architecture merely mirror these values, or can it serve as a critical agent for rethinking and transformation? In this regard, the concept of “critical architecture”—as an approach that challenges dominant ideologies and reveals social contradictions—has gained a significant place in contemporary architectural discourse (Strecker, 2008, 91). Despite the increasing attention to this concept, there are still many ambiguities surrounding the precise definition of “critical architecture,” its theoretical and philosophical foundations, and its relationship with “architectural criticism.” These ambiguities hinder the full realization of architecture’s potential as a medium for critique and social transformation. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by thoroughly examining the concept of “critical architecture” and clarifying its relation to “architectural criticism.” The central research questions are as follows: What are the theoretical and philosophical foundations that have influenced the formation of the concept of “critical architecture”? How can the concept of “critical architecture” be defined? And what is the relationship between “critical architecture” and “architectural criticism”?

To articulate the theoretical framework precisely, this study draws on a range of theoretical perspectives. According to Michel Foucault (1976)’s approach, knowledge and discourse are formed through the analysis of hidden structures and historical discontinuities; concepts do not inherently emerge, but rather are produced and transformed within specific discursive contexts and in response to external forces and social changes. This perspective provides the foundation for a deeper reconsideration of architecture’s role as an agent for critiquing structures of power and dominant ideologies. On the other hand, Laclau & Mouffe (1985)’s “discourse analysis” theory offers a rigorous framework for understanding resistant discourses that contribute to the critique of cultural and social structures.

In this study, the perspectives of Michael Hays and Jane Rendell are examined within this theoretical context. Influenced by thinkers such as Adorno and Jameson, Hays conceptualizes “critical architecture” as a resistant approach against the dominant culture, while Rendell—drawing on Marx, Hegel, and other modern critical theories—presents it as an interdisciplinary and transformative practice. It is worth noting that alongside these two main perspectives, some opposing theorists have also critiqued traditional views. For instance, in his works, Kenneth Frampton (1980) emphasizes the importance of architecture’s formal and structural aspects, arguing that an exclusive focus on ideological critique may overlook the intrinsic innovations and local values of architecture. Although these opposing viewpoints are only briefly addressed in the text, they are considered part of a multifaceted approach to the analysis of architectural discourse.

The aim of this study is to explore the theoretical foundations of “critical architecture” through the ideas of Michael Hays, an architectural historian and critic, and Jane Rendell, a historian and critic of art and architecture. While other perspectives on this concept exist, this paper conducts a comparative study of these two theorists to clarify the relationship between “critical architecture” and “architectural criticism” and to explain how both can serve as tools for critique and social transformation. The articles “Critical architecture: Between culture and form” by Hays (1984) and “Critical Architecture: Between Criticism and Design” by Rendell (2007) are considered the primary sources for analysis. Furthermore, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical scope of “critical architecture,” the structure of the study is organized into four sections: the first section elaborates on Hays’s views regarding key concepts such as “culture,” “form,” and “critical architecture”; the second examines Rendell’s perspectives on “design,” “criticism,” and “critical architecture”; the third section clarifies the relationship between “critical architecture” and “architectural criticism”; and finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the similarities and differences between the two theorists in defining “critical architecture” and explaining its connection to “architectural criticism.”

## Research Background

Previously, Murray Fraser (2005), in his article “The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture”, attempted to trace the theoretical roots of “critical architecture” in the works of Manfredo Tafuri, the influence of Frankfurt School “critical theory,” and the cultural studies of Stuart Hall. He envisions two main goals for critical architecture: (1) the critique of capitalist social structures, and (2) the internal critique of architectural methods. Fraser emphasizes that “critical architecture” must, rather than merely adopting a critical stance, engage with cultural complexities and differences—especially in the context of globalization—by using design as a means of cultural engagement and transformation. He argues that architecture should address issues such as social, racial, and gender inequalities through situated engagement with specific cultural contexts (*ibid.*, 320). However, Fraser’s article does not provide a comprehensive overview of other definitions of “critical architecture” or the development of the concept. Maurizio Sabini (2015), in his article “Re-setting the Critical Project”, argues that the notion of “critical architecture” as articulated in past decades by figures such as Hays has become distorted and misinterpreted. He claims that it has now been reduced to a limited and ineffective theory that no longer meets the demands of contemporary conditions. In his view, “critical architecture” should not be confined to theoretical critique or the production of aesthetic and experimental forms; rather, it must move beyond its theoretical boundaries and evolve into practical “cultural projects” that address real societal issues such as social inequality, economic struggles, and cultural needs (*ibid.*, 389). His writing, however, remains silent on the origins and historical formation of the concept. On another front, Chantal Mouffe (2023), in her article “On the political, public space and the possibility of a critical architecture”, focuses on concepts such as “politics,” “public space,” and “critical architecture,” offering a framework that fundamentally redefines the roles of conflict, power, and hegemony in human societies. She views art as inseparable from politics, playing a central role in constructing, reproducing, or transforming symbolic and hegemonic orders. In this context, “critical art” challenges dominant

hegemonies by creating new languages, methods, and forms, thus opening up new spaces for identity formation. She contends that, like “critical art,” “critical architecture” must actively intervene in “public space” and within socio-political systems to not only critique existing conditions but also propose actionable alternatives for social change (*ibid.*, 34). Likewise, Louise Martin (2011), in a chapter titled “Critical architecture and Fredric Jameson” from the book *The Political Unconscious of Architecture: Re-Opening Jameson’s Narrative*, defines “critical architecture” based on the theories of Fredric Jameson—a philosopher, critic, and Marxist theorist—as a tool for exposing and critiquing capitalist ideologies. She asserts that Jameson, influenced by thinkers like Manfredo Tafuri and Henri Lefebvre, sought through his theory of the “political unconscious” to connect ideological critique with architectural analysis. According to this theory, all cultural productions, including architecture, unconsciously carry political and ideological messages; hence, “architectural criticism” must go beyond surface forms and address the structural relations between power, economy, and culture (*ibid.*, 171). Table 1 summarizes Aims and Contributions of the mentioned resources and limitations of them in relation to this research. It is also worth noting that, to date, no direct research on this topic has been conducted by Persian-language scholars.

In addition to research conducted within the field of architecture, Michel Foucault’s critical theories on the mechanisms of power in the production of space are also of significant relevance. Foucault (1975), through his analysis of disciplinary institutions such as prisons, demonstrates how spatial organization and the distribution of visibility become tools for the exercise of power, gradually internalizing discipline within individuals’ behavior (Raman & Coyne, 2000, 86). This approach is grounded in the idea that space, time, language, and even the human body are not merely neutral or natural domains; rather, power flows through them, shaping seemingly self-evident “truths.” Foucault (1976) emphasizes that none of the concepts, institutions, or social norms are inherently neutral or immutable; instead, they gain legitimacy in each historical period through specific discursive formations and are always open to critique and reinterpretation. Such

Table 1. Previous Studies on Critical Architecture. Source: Authors.

| No. | Authors       | Aims and Contributions   | Limitations of the Present Study   |
|-----|---------------|--|--|
| 1   | Fraser (2005) | Investigates the theoretical foundations of “critical architecture” by drawing on the works of Tafuri and the influence of Frankfurt School “critical theory” and Stuart Hall’s cultural studies; identifies two main objectives: (1) critique of capitalist social structures and (2) internal critique of architectural methods. | Fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of other definitions and the conceptual evolution of “critical architecture”; limited to theoretical analysis without addressing its practical applications in diverse cultural contexts. |
| 2   | Sabini (2015) | Critically reflects on the theoretical discourse of “critical architecture” developed in previous decades; argues for a transition from purely theoretical approaches to practical “cultural projects” that respond to real societal issues such as social inequality and economic challenges.                                     | Does not address the origins and formative causes of the concept; and presents a limited theory deemed ineffective for addressing contemporary needs.  |
| 3   | Mouffe (2023) | Proposes a framework to redefine the role of conflict, power, and hegemony in “critical architecture”; emphasizes the close relationship between art and politics and the potential of artistic practices to transform symbolic and hegemonic orders through the creation of new languages and methods.                            | Lacks an in-depth analysis of the historical development and localized applications of the theory; focuses more on political and symbolic dimensions rather than a comprehensive structural analysis.                                    |
| 4   | Martin (2023) | Defines “critical architecture” based on Fredric Jameson’s theories as a tool to expose and critique capitalist ideologies; emphasizes the “political unconscious” as a key to interpreting cultural and architectural messages.   | Insufficient attention to structural and social dimensions; does not explore the connection between architectural messages and deeper shifts in power, economy, and culture.   |

an approach can be applied to architectural studies as well, offering a critical and innovative perspective for revealing the embedded power relations within spatial forms and informing their design and organization.

### Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and focuses on content analysis and textual interpretation to explore the concept of “critical architecture” and its relationship with “architectural criticism.” Employing documentary analysis, the research examines the primary texts of Michael Hays and Jane Rendell along with relevant secondary sources, aiming to uncover the theoretical foundations of these concepts from the perspectives of the two theorists. Through the extraction and interpretation of key themes from the texts, this qualitative approach enables a more precise understanding of the similarities and differences in their viewpoints. Ultimately, by analyzing these perspectives, the study concludes that “critical architecture” can serve as an effective tool for critique and social transformation.

### The Concept of Critical Architecture in the Thought of Hays

The concept of “critical architecture” was first introduced in Michael Hays (1984)’s article “Critical Architecture:

Between Culture and Form.” His idea was shaped by the influence of thinkers such as Manfredo Tafuri, Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, and Fredric Jameson, and it falls within the broader “critical” discourse in architecture (Cingel et al., 2024, 116). Hays believed that architecture must engage critically with its socio-cultural context while resisting dominant norms and avoiding submission to pure formalism (Baird, 2004, 2). In an interview with the editors of *Perspecta*, issue 33, Hays stated that, in his view, the term “critical” in “critical architecture” stems from “critical theory” and can be summarized as: “the constant imagination of, search for, and construction of alternatives” (Osman et al., 2002). With this definition, Hays aligns creativity and production with the notion of “critique.” For him, criticism is not merely a response to existing conditions but a tool for envisioning a different and more diverse future—thus positioning critical architecture as an active agent of change.

In the aforementioned text, Hays challenges two dominant interpretations of architecture—namely, “architecture as an instrument of culture” and “architecture as autonomous form”—to define the concept of “critical architecture.” He identifies several works by Mies van der Rohe as notable examples of this approach, as they are not influenced by the forms or critical manifestos of the past and stand in clear opposition to their own contextual conditions

(Danaeifar & Tafazzoli, 2021, 11). Like Tafuri, Hays believes that architecture should not merely reproduce the dominant ideologies of society but must instead question them and reveal underlying social contradictions (Martin, 2011, 179). According to Hays, the notion of “architecture as an instrument of culture” refers to a perspective in which architecture is seen as a product that reflects and reproduces the values, ideologies, and cultural hegemonies of a society. From this viewpoint, architecture functions as an “epiphenomenon” in the service of the dominant culture, with its primary role being to represent or legitimize the prevailing social, economic, and political order. Hays (1984) critiques this understanding by arguing that such a definition reduces architecture to a passive instrument that merely mirrors existing power structures and values. In this conception, architecture lacks a critical or self-aware role and serves only to reinforce the status quo. He cites examples such as neoclassical architecture, which through form and aesthetics represents political power. The interpretation of “architecture as autonomous form,” on the other hand, refers to a view that treats architecture as an autonomous system, one that can be understood independently of cultural, social, or historical contexts. This approach reduces architecture to a pure art form focused solely on formal and aesthetic concerns, detached from cultural influences and dependencies. Hays (1984) argues that this view implies an underlying admission of the powerlessness of form itself: “Nevertheless, the absolute autonomy of form and its superiority over historical and material contingencies is proclaimed, not by virtue of its power in the world, but by virtue of its admitted powerlessness. Reduced to pure form, architecture has disarmed itself from the start, maintaining its purity by acceding to social and political inefficacy” (ibid.). Hays also critiques this perspective, asserting that it disconnects architecture from its cultural and political contexts, thereby stripping it of its social and critical function and reducing it to a purely aesthetic object (ibid.).

Hays, by critiquing and analyzing these two interpretations of architecture—“architecture as an instrument of culture” and “architecture as autonomous form”—introduces “critical architecture” as a solution that mediates between

these polar definitions. He argues that architecture can be neither entirely independent of “culture” nor merely a passive tool in its service. Instead, “critical architecture” must operate in a space between “form” and “culture”: “a critical architecture, one resistant to the self-confirming, conciliatory operations of a dominant culture and yet irreducible to a purely formal structure disengaged from the contingencies of place and time” (ibid.). Hays emphasizes that “critical architecture” provides a framework for interaction between form and culture—a space where architectural forms are detached from dominant cultural frameworks and function as platforms for reflection, resistance, and reinterpretation. In line with Marxist theories and the Frankfurt School, Hays conceives of “critical architecture” as inherently oppositional, standing against prevailing cultural values such as consumerism and superficiality, and offering a critique of social norms (Macarthur & Stead, 2006, 124). From his perspective, “critical architecture” possesses a critical capacity that is not only shaped by the social, ideological, economic, biographical, or technological contexts of its time but also treats architecture as an autonomous intellectual endeavor capable of generating knowledge within itself (Janniere, 2010, 38). Therefore, a deeper understanding of “critical architecture” in Hays’s thought requires a clearer grasp of the concepts of “culture” and “form” as he defines them. Based on Hays’s article, the concept of “culture” can be explained in two dimensions.

1. Culture as a set of theoretical and practical systems: Hays defines “culture” as a constellation of ideological, social, and value-based theoretical and practical systems that are shaped through historical and social processes and exert their hegemony over various aspects of life, including architecture. In this view, “culture” is a central force that directs architectural production and is regarded as the primary determinant of the form and nature of buildings. Thus, within the cultural framework, architecture is understood both as a product of culture and as an instrument that reinforces it (Hays, 1984, 29).

2. Culture as both producer and consumer of cultural products: Hays emphasizes that architecture always operates within a cultural system that both produces

it and is nourished by it. In other words, architecture can embody the dominant values and beliefs of a given culture, or act as a critical force in opposition to them. From this perspective, “culture” is not only the context in which architecture is produced but is also redefined and reproduced through architecture itself (*ibid.*, 16). In Hays’s view, “culture” both influences the production of architecture and is challenged by it. He presents culture as a formative force that simultaneously generates architecture and is sustained by it. Architecture, therefore, is not only a product of “culture,” but can also serve as a tool for either reinforcing or transforming it. For this reason, Hays conceptualizes “culture” both as the historical and social context of architecture and as a hegemonic force within which “critical architecture” can expose social contradictions, values, and limitations, and act as a catalyst for intellectual and spatial transformation (*ibid.*, 17).

According to Hays, the concept of “form”—as a multilayered instrument that can both reinforce and challenge dominant culture—can be understood in several dimensions.

1. Form as a structure independent of historical and social context: This perspective emphasizes the autonomy of the architectural object, viewing the building as an entity that can be understood without reference to its historical or social background. Influenced by formalist positions, this approach seeks to establish the independence of architecture from external determinants (*Bolouri Bazaz & Mostaghni, 2019, 7*). The focus here is on “formal operations,” which Hays defines as “how its parts have been put together, how it is a wholly integrated and equilibrated system that can be understood without external references, and as importantly, how it may be reused, how its constituent parts and processes may be recombined” (*Hays, 1984, 16*). Hays explains that this view emerged as a reaction against contextual approaches, which emphasize the understanding of architectural works within broader networks of human relationships and social frameworks (*Kaji-O’Grady, 2013, 152*). However, Hays challenges the notion that “form” can be fully understood as a completely autonomous system, detached from its cultural context.

2. Form as spatial experience: In this perspective, “form” is not perceived merely as a visual or physical attribute, but as a key component of the spatial experience of the observer. Hays (*1984, 18*) emphasizes that architectural form should have the capacity to alter human perception of space and prompt individuals to confront social and cultural contradictions. In this sense, spatial experience transforms form from a static object into an event with sensuous and experiential qualities.

3. Form as the Production and Perception of Meaning: Hays (*ibid., 16*) contends that “form” is more than an aesthetic phenomenon or a response to function. In his view, architectural form has the capacity not only to represent complex social, political, and cultural ideas but also to produce and communicate meaning. In other words, form operates as a visual and sensory language that enables the interpretation and reinterpretation of diverse dimensions of human experience.

4. Form as a Tool for Resistance: Hays (*ibid., 17*) argues that within “critical architecture,” “form” can function as a means of resistance against dominant culture and cultural hegemony. In other words, innovative and non-traditional forms have the potential to disrupt prevailing structures of meaning and prompt the viewer to reconsider dominant values and ideologies. This perspective highlights that architectural form is more than merely aesthetic or functional; it acts as an active language of critique and dissent, capable of challenging existing power structures in society.

In Hays’s view, “form” in architecture goes beyond its physical, visual, or aesthetic dimensions. It can function as a medium for generating and perceiving new spatial experiences, creating meaning in architectural works, and critically engaging with the dominant cultural conditions of architecture. More importantly, it serves as a powerful instrument for societal transformation. In other words, “form” not only acts as a medium for expressing ideologies but also as an agent of cultural and social change. Therefore, in Hays’s theoretical framework, “form” possesses critical and interventionist capacities that can redefine meaning and contribute to fundamental shifts within society.

Given Hays’s understanding of “culture” and “form,”

and the roles these concepts play in his definition of “critical architecture,” the works of Mies van der Rohe are introduced as fitting examples of this approach. Hays argues that Mies’s architectural works, while engaging with the formal language of modernism and its aesthetic ideals, simultaneously offer a critique of the cultural values and ideologies of their time—thus embodying the notion of “critical architecture.” As Hays puts it, “Mies sought to define architecture as an autonomous phenomenon with its own identity. He aimed to create an architecture that was not merely a reflection of culture or technology, but one that stood as an independent expression with its own inherent values” (*ibid.*, 18). The main reasons he offers in support of this claim can be outlined as follows:

1. Rejection of the Representation of Dominant Cultural Values: Hays argues that Mies van der Rohe’s architecture goes beyond the mere representation of dominant cultural values. Rather than affirming and reinforcing cultural hegemony, his work presents forms that deliberately avoid full alignment with capitalist ideology or historical styles. Hays contends that Mies’s use of pure and minimalist forms serves to challenge the prevailing socio-economic ideologies (*ibid.*, 18).

2. Avoidance of Stereotypical and Predefined Forms: Hays maintains that Mies van der Rohe deliberately distanced himself from producing stereotypical or predetermined forms, particularly in projects such as the German Pavilion in Barcelona. Instead, he created forms that, despite their apparent simplicity, offered a layered and complex spatial experience for the viewer. Rather than adhering to traditional hierarchies or classical symmetry, Mies employed unexpected juxtapositions and combinations of materials such as glass, marble, and chrome. This approach allowed space and form in his work to perform a critical function, challenging conventional understandings of architecture (*ibid.*, 22).

3. Critical Engagement with Cultural and Historical Contexts: According to Hays (*ibid.*, 21), works by Mies van der Rohe—such as the 1922 skyscraper project and the Barcelona Pavilion—engage critically with their cultural and historical contexts. These projects do not merely respond to their socio-cultural environments, but actively expose existing contradictions and tensions. For

example, in the design of the glass skyscraper, rather than emphasizing the grandeur and authority of capitalism, Mies employs reflection and transparency to blur the boundaries between architectural form and urban space. In doing so, he offers an implicit critique of capitalist urban hegemony and the structures of power embedded within it.

4. Creating “Silent Architecture” as a Critique of Modern Life: Hays points out that Mies van der Rohe employed the notion of “silence” in his architecture to establish a critical spatial condition. Hays adopts the concept of architectural “silence” directly from Tafuri’s critique of architectural formalism. Previously, Tafuri had interpreted Mies’s architecture as a symbol of a disquieting silence amidst the chaos of the modern metropolis (Martin, 2011, 180). For instance, in his projects—especially the Barcelona Pavilion—Mies refrains from representing conventional values and instead creates a space in which the absence of superfluous ornamentation and the focus on the raw essence of materials evoke a profound, multilayered silence. This silence prompts introspection and invites the viewer to question the dominant cultural and social values of their time. It is manifested both in the formal language of the architecture and as a signifier of critique directed at existing power structures and hegemonic ideologies (Hays, 1984, 26).

Hays believes that Mies van der Rohe’s architectural works can be regarded as exemplary of the concept of “critical architecture,” precisely because they manage to resist the dominant cultural and ideological values of their time while offering an unconventional and novel spatial experience. “The meaning of Mies’s buildings is not limited to their form and structure. Rather, it is the experience of inhabiting them and their interaction with the surrounding environment that adds to their meaning. These buildings function not only as structures but also as social critics, helping us to see the world around us differently” (*ibid.*, 23).

Through their engagement with the social and cultural context—employing modern forms, innovative material combinations, and generating new spatial experiences—these works create a critical rupture between dominant culture and architecture. They demonstrate that “critical

architecture” can play an active role in “architectural criticism” by questioning and reshaping the cultural narratives embedded in the built environment.

Although Hays does not explicitly refer to “architectural criticism” in his definition of “critical architecture,” he argues that architectural criticism—through its analysis of the social, cultural, historical, and formal contexts of architecture, as well as the dominant ideologies shaping it—provides the intellectual and theoretical foundation upon which “critical architecture” can be built. “Criticism delimits a field of values within which architecture can develop cultural knowledge” (*ibid.*, 27). Hays believes that architectural criticism plays a vital role in the advancement of architectural discourse. However, it should not remain confined to merely describing or analyzing built works; rather, it must challenge traditional norms and approaches, fostering critical dialogue and reflection. In his view, “architectural criticism” and “critical architecture” are two sides of the same coin: criticism equips us with the theoretical tools necessary to identify and confront dominant ideologies, while critical architecture applies those tools in practice. It moves beyond theory into action, engaging directly with the realm of design and construction—not just as a form of analysis, but as a mode of embodied critique. As Hays asserts, “If critical architectural design is resistant and oppositional, then architectural criticism—as activity and knowledge—should be openly contentious and oppositional, as well” (*ibid.*).

Later, Hays expanded his definition of “critical architecture” in his book “Architecture Theory in 1968”, introducing the concept as a form of “practice of mediation” by drawing on Fredric Jameson’s theory of “cognitive mapping.” Jameson, a prominent literary theorist and critic, developed cognitive mapping as a method for analyzing and understanding the complexities of modern capitalist society, particularly in the realms of culture and art (Martin, 2011, 188). Rather than viewing cultural phenomena in isolation, this theory enables their interpretation within the broader contexts of society and history (Pieniniemi, 2024, 120). “Cognitive mapping” refers to the construction of a mental model of a complex, multilayered space that includes social, economic, political,

and cultural relations (Jameson, 1985, 55). Based on this theory, Hays argues that cultural phenomena—including architecture—can function as transformative forces that help individuals engage with the world in a more critical way. Accordingly, architecture is not merely a physical structure but a “practice of mediation” situated between culture, society, and the individual. This mediation not only situates architecture within its social and historical contexts but also leads to the production of new concepts that reveal the practical limits of architecture and open up possibilities for critical intervention within architectural space (Martin, 2011, 197). Hays also sought to pursue these questions through the founding of the journal *Assemblage*, which aimed to explore the relationships between “critical architecture,” “culture,” and “form,” while interrogating the established disciplinary boundaries between architecture and other academic and cultural fields (Qayyomi Bidhendi & Danaeifar, 2019, 67). Ultimately, Hays’s theory of “critical architecture” seeks to establish it as a discursive approach to architectural design—one that offers the tools to comprehend the complex environment in which architecture operates (Zhu, 2023, 171).

### **The Concept of Critical Architecture in the Thought of Rendell**

At the Critical Architecture conference held in 2004 by the Architectural Humanities Research Association, the Bartlett School of Architecture, and University College London, the separation and interconnection of the concepts of “design” and “criticism” were questioned within an interdisciplinary framework and regarded as forms of critical practice (Danaeifar & Tafazzoli, 2021, 12). In a text titled “Critical Architecture: Between Criticism and Design,” written as the preface to the conference proceedings, Jane Rendell offered a fresh perspective on the concept. Challenging the traditional division between “design” as material production and “criticism” as interpretive evaluation, she wrote: “Critical Architecture is an attempt to examine the relationship between design and criticism by placing architecture in an interdisciplinary context and considering its various activities as forms of critical practice” (Rendell et al., 2007, 1). The key concepts

shaping Rendell's understanding of "critical architecture" include interdisciplinarity, autonomy, critical theory, contamination of boundaries, and social responsibility. According to Rendell's writing, the concept of "architecture" can be explained through two interrelated notions: "multidisciplinary" and "interdisciplinarity." She argues that architecture, due to the breadth and diversity of its areas of inquiry—from history and theory to design and technology—is inherently a multidisciplinary subject. However, when the various scientific and practical elements within architecture critically engage with one another and generate new forms of knowledge through such interaction, architecture transcends the limits of a multidisciplinary approach and enters the domain of interdisciplinarity. This shift becomes especially evident when architectural researchers collaborate with specialists from other fields such as sociology, information technology, or environmental sciences—not merely drawing from their knowledge, but also interrogating their research methods and practices. Rendell emphasizes: "Architecture is a multidisciplinary subject, which can operate in an interdisciplinary way." (*ibid.*, 2). This characteristic makes architecture a flexible and effective instrument for engaging with complex and multifaceted issues.

Influenced by critical theorists such as Marx, Kant, Hegel, and later thinkers including Kristeva, Bhabha, and Geuss, Rendell draws upon "critical theory" as a foundational framework for redefining the relationship between "design" and "criticism" in architecture (*ibid.*, 4). Referring to the perspective of philosopher and social theorist Raymond Geuss (1981) in "The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School", he identifies two defining features of critical theory: (1) "self-reflectivity"—the capacity to critically examine one's own roles, functions, and frameworks; and (2) "a desire to change the world"—an intention that goes beyond analysis toward the pursuit of social transformation. Geuss describes "self-reflectivity" as a conscious process through which individuals or societies critically interrogate the ideological structures shaping their behaviors and practices. The legacy of the Frankfurt School—particularly its emphasis on these two principles—continues to

serve as a vital framework for critiquing dominant ideologies and power structures in contemporary architecture (Mills & Burston, 2022, 43). This approach underscores that critical concepts and methodologies are essential not only for analyzing the dynamic between design and criticism but also for formulating transformative strategies to improve socio-cultural conditions. It is a process that begins with identifying limitations and external influences. Rendell (Rendell et al., 2007) highlights "the desire to change the world" as the primary objective of critical theory—a theory that, beyond analysis, seeks to offer possibilities for improvement or transformation. Geuss (1981, 55), drawing on the legacy of the Frankfurt School and the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, views these principles as integral to a theory concerned with both understanding and changing contemporary socio-historical conditions.

Referring to Raymond Geuss's perspective, Rendell (Rendell et al., 2007, 4) argues that if both criticism and design demonstrate self-reflectivity and express a desire for social change, they can be considered forms of critical practice. Additionally, she adopts the phrase "the constant imagination, search for, and construction of alternatives"—used by Geuss in his account of critical theory and previously cited by Hays—as a guiding principle in her own understanding of critical architecture. This theoretical framework allows Rendell to assert that criticism, insofar as it embodies the core characteristics of critical theory—namely self-reflection and the ambition to transform the world—can itself be understood as a particular form of critical practice:

"Criticism has a specific purpose, which is to provide a commentary (a social and historical context, a judgment, an explanation, a discriminating point of view, a response, or even a point of departure) on a cultural work – art, literature, film or architecture. If criticism is defined by a demand to give an account of a work, evaluate it, and position it – culturally and critically – then does this stop criticism from being understood in terms of critical practice? I would argue that it does not and that criticism, if it expresses the qualities of critical theory outlined above, can be understood as a particular form of critical practice, one which always has an 'other' in mind. However, it

is precisely at this point that disagreement often ensues, with commentators refusing to see how criticism, since it does not usually produce ‘buildings’, can be thought of in terms of design, or how to design, since it does not operate through ‘writing’, can be thought of as criticism – to think the two together is to make a muddle. Instead, I maintain that to think design and criticism together is productive, and demands that we call into question the definitions and assumptions that underpin both modes of activity” (*ibid.*, 4).

According to Rendell, the concepts of “architectural criticism” and “critical architecture” are deeply intertwined, with “criticism” functioning as a vital component of this approach. She contends that “criticism” is not merely an evaluative or judgmental activity limited to analyzing built forms; rather, it is itself a form of “critical practice”, with the aim of enacting transformation within practice. In her writing, Rendell draws on the ideas of Kant, Hegel, and Peg Rawes to develop a more profound understanding of the notion of “critique.” Referring to Immanuel Kant (2019)’s “Critique of Pure Reason”, Rendell interprets “critique” as a process of reflecting on the conditions and limits of knowledge—a view that aligns with her goal of redefining “architectural criticism” as a self-questioning practice. Influenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s reworking of Kant’s critique, she further asserts that “critique” not only reflects on its object but also on itself. Moreover, Rendell builds on the work of Peg Rawes, a scholar at the Bartlett School of Architecture, who argues that in Kant (1998)’s “Critique of Judgment”, “critique” acquires an “embodied” dimension—it becomes tied to lived experience and human sensation. In this perspective, “critique” is no longer an abstract operation confined to the mind, but one that engages the senses and the body. As such, “critique” becomes more closely aligned with “design,” which is itself a “material” and “sensuous” process. This view paves the way for bridging the perceived divide between “design” and “criticism,” suggesting that the two are not oppositional, but rather complementary dimensions of “architecture.” In Rendell’s view, and drawing from Kant, Hegel, and Rawes, “a concept of critique emerges—self-reflective and embodied—that comes close to practice,

bridging the split between design as a material, subjective, and embodied process, and criticism as an abstract, objective, and distanced one.” (Rendell et al., 2007, 5).

According to Rendell, “design” is defined as an integral aspect of “critical architecture.” She argues that “design” itself can function as a form of “criticism.” Emphasizing that “design” in the context of “critical architecture” goes beyond the mere production of buildings or material artifacts, Rendell views it as a process that challenges existing conditions and questions the common assumption that design is confined to execution. Because “design” has the capacity to engage with social, cultural, and environmental issues, it becomes deeply intertwined with “criticism.” Thus, “critical architecture” redefines “design” not merely as a technical or aesthetic activity, but as a mode of practice that contributes to critical discourse within the field of architecture (*ibid.*). Rejecting the traditional separation between “criticism” and “design,” Rendell maintains that thinking of them together can lead to a creative and generative approach—one that demands a self-reflectivity of the definitions and assumptions that underpin both domains. In other words, when “criticism” and “design” are framed as forms of “critical practice,” they have the potential to reimagine architecture as a tool for social and cultural transformation, and in doing so, open up new possibilities for creativity in the design process (Bedford, 2022, 340).

Rendell goes on to explore the concept of “critique” through the perspectives of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, examining how both thinkers redefined the relationship between “critique” and “creation” in the fields of literature, art, and architecture—emphasizing that the two are inseparably connected. In “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers”, Barthes (1977, 190) famously wrote, “To criticize is to call into crisis”, highlighting one of the central tasks of “critique.” Especially in disciplines such as literature or architecture, critique is not merely a matter of judgment or evaluation; rather, it is a process that interrogates assumptions, values, and even the fundamental structures of a work (Rendell et al., 2007, 5). Rendell et al. (*ibid.*) argue that this crisis-generating potential of “critique” is also applicable to “design,” since, as Derrida (1992) suggests

in “Acts of Literature”, the boundaries between “critique” and “literature,” or more broadly between “critique” and any creative act, are neither fixed nor pure. Creation cannot occur without a form of “critique” or “self-reflectivity.” In the context of architecture, this implies that the architect, in the act of design, is not only generating form or space, but is simultaneously questioning existing conditions, structural limitations, and even prior architectural concepts. Likewise, the architectural critic, in interpreting a work, can move beyond passive judgment to actively participate in redefining architectural ideas and meanings. As Rendell writes, “I agree with Derrida’s position, and suggest that we give up the frontier and cease drawing lines to separate design and criticism, that we look instead to sites of contamination – perhaps of interdisciplinarity – for these call into question existing definitions and demand instead new forms of critical and creative work.” (Rendell et al., 2007, 5). The core insight in the views of Barthes and Derrida is that “design” and “critique” should not be treated as two separate activities, but rather as intertwined processes—whereby architectural design, through the creation of forms and spaces, can act as a critique of the status quo. Ultimately, what we learn from Barthes and Derrida is the importance of “self-reflectivity” in both “design” and “critique.” Without “self-reflectivity,” “design” risks becoming a repetition of existing forms and procedures, while “critique” risks devolving into static and superficial judgment. But when both operate in a self-reflective way, they become dynamic processes that reinforce each other and dissolve the boundaries between them (Ji, 2023, 710).

According to Rendell, “critical architecture” is an interdisciplinary practice that dissolves the conventional boundary between “design” and “criticism,” merging them into a unified, self-reflective process. In this view, “architecture” is no longer understood merely as the creation of space or the production of material artifacts; rather, through its integration with “criticism,” it becomes an interdisciplinary domain where ideas, methods, and theories from various disciplines actively interact. Within such a framework, “design” is no longer solely concerned with form or function, and “criticism” is not limited to the evaluation of completed works. Instead,

both operate simultaneously in the production of meaning, fostering rethinking and contributing to cultural and social transformation.

### **The Relationship Between “Critical Architecture” and “Architectural Criticism”**

“Critique” is one of the defining features of human societies. It not only distinguishes humans from non-humans but also plays a significant role in differentiating societies from one another. It is difficult to imagine a dynamic society committed to intellectual and cultural growth—particularly in a field like architecture—without the presence of critique. The term “critique” is polysemous; at times it is used synonymously with evaluation, judgment, or analysis, and at other times it refers to reading, interpretation, or description (Namavar Motlagh, 2019, 10). Like other branches of knowledge and science, architecture needs criticism to evolve and to avoid the vicious cycle of repetition. Today, “architectural criticism”, grounded in intellectual engagement and reflective thought, can serve a variety of functions—such as description, judgment, interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and reading of works—especially when applied to intellectual products or social phenomena expressed through works of art. This approach stands in contrast to classical criticism, which was largely limited to binary comparisons and functional elements (Haghir, 2003, 248). However, with the emergence of the concept of “critical architecture”, which involves both theoretical and practical dimensions and draws its foundations from the broader notion of “critique”, the precise relationship between this concept and “architectural criticism” remains somewhat ambiguous. From Michael Hays’s perspective, the relationship between “critical architecture” and “architectural criticism” lies in their shared capacity to examine and challenge dominant cultural and formal paradigms. Hays defines “critical architecture” as an architectural practice situated “between culture and form,” which “cannot be reduced either to a conciliatory representation of external forces or to a dogmatic, reproducible formal system” (Hays, 1984, 17). Within this framework, “architectural criticism” is not limited to interpreting architectural

works merely as cultural products or autonomous artifacts; rather, it is understood as an active process that investigates the interweaving of cultural and material dimensions in architecture. Hays argues that “criticism” should engage with “the intrinsic conditions through which architecture is made possible,” treating architecture as both a part of the world and distinct from it (*ibid.*). In this view, “architectural criticism” operates alongside “critical architecture”, and both resist the constraints of predetermined cultural ideologies and purely formalist interpretations. Similarly, Jeremy Till (2013) emphasizes that architecture is inherently shaped by external forces and factors; the notion of absolute autonomy in this field is, he suggests, a myth. Critique of the traditional concept of architectural autonomy opens up space for rethinking architecture’s role in social, political, and economic change. This perspective—by redefining the boundaries between “criticism” and “design”—provides a coherent foundation for further discussions on interdisciplinary and transformative applications within architecture.

Jane Rendell also emphasizes the close connection between “critique” and “critical architecture,” but she approaches this relationship from an interdisciplinary perspective. She challenges the traditional division between “design” and “criticism” and suggests that “criticism” itself can be understood as a particular form of critical practice. Rendell defines “critique” as a self-reflective and social process that is capable of addressing broader cultural, political, and even environmental concerns. Drawing on “critical theory,” she characterizes “criticism” as an “autonomous form of critical practice”—one that has the potential to shape architectural discourse by questioning the ideological structures that govern both design and interpretation (Rendell et al., 2007, 5). In Rendell’s view, the integration of “criticism” and “design” disrupts pre-established boundaries, transforming architecture into a force for change. This synthesis generates new forms of knowledge and creative methods, positioning both “criticism” and “design” as essential components of “critical architecture.”

While both Hays and Rendell emphasize the integration of “criticism” and “critical architecture,” their approaches reflect significant differences. Hays, focusing on the

dialectical tension between “culture” and “form,” defines “critical architecture” as a resistant and oppositional practice that, despite its engagement with cultural context, remains distinct from it. In this sense, he presents “criticism” and “critical architecture” as tools for cultural critique. Rendell, on the other hand, highlights the interdisciplinary nature of “critical architecture” and proposes a fluid relationship between “criticism” and “design.” She views “criticism” as a social and transformative act—one that dissolves disciplinary boundaries and contributes to the generation of new knowledge. Although their perspectives differ, both theorists reject reductive interpretations of “architectural criticism,” recognizing “critique” as an active and essential component of “critical architecture.”

## Conclusion

The theoretical foundations of the concept of “critical architecture” originate in the philosophical discourse of “critical theory.” Thinkers such as Adorno, Hegel, Marx, and Kant—and later figures like Jameson, Derrida, and Geuss—have significantly influenced the development of this concept. “Critical theory,” particularly as articulated by Adorno within the Frankfurt School, regards architecture, like other cultural fields, as a site of resistance against the hegemony of dominant ideologies. It argues that architecture should not merely reflect existing values but should instead become a vehicle for critique and social transformation. Within this framework, the theories of Hays and Rendell not only emphasize rethinking the role of architecture as a cultural product but also explore the potential for generating critical spatiality through architectural design. While Hays and Rendell offer distinct yet overlapping interpretations of “critical architecture,” both theorists underscore its capacity to operate as a medium of resistance and reflection. From Hays’s perspective, “critical architecture” occupies a space between “culture” and “form”—a space in which architecture resists reproducing or imitating dominant values and instead offers oppositional and resistant forms as a mode of critique. He defines “critical architecture” as a form of mediation—one that is neither entirely autonomous from its historical and social context nor

reducible to a representational instrument of prevailing “culture.” Through his analysis of the works of Mies van der Rohe, Hays demonstrates how architecture can use minimalist yet multilayered forms and spatial experiences to critique contemporary ideologies and cultural narratives. Rendell, on the other hand, foregrounds the interdisciplinary nature of “critical architecture.” She argues that it bridges the gap between “design” and “criticism,” merging them into a single, unified act. In this view, architecture is no longer simply the production of material objects or the analysis of those objects, but a critical practice that simultaneously engages in making and thinking. In other words, “critical architecture,” from Rendell’s perspective, is a process that employs both “design” and “criticism” as tools for cultural and social transformation.

The relationship between “critical architecture” and “architectural criticism” holds particular significance in the theories of both Hays and Rendell, although the two theorists take different paths in articulating this connection. For Hays, “architectural criticism” and “critical architecture” are complementary: “criticism” provides the theoretical foundation for “critical architecture” by analyzing the social, cultural, and formal contexts of architecture. Hays views “criticism” as an autonomous intellectual activity, the outcomes of which inform “critical architecture” in its effort to resist dominant ideologies through the creation of alternative forms and spaces. In contrast, Rendell sees the relationship between the two as more than complementary—she emphasizes their integration. She argues that “design” can itself function as a form of “criticism,” and that “criticism” can be embedded within the design process. From this perspective, “critical architecture” is conceived as a space in which “design” and “criticism” operate as forms of “critical practice,” collaboratively producing meaning, challenging cultural ideologies, and contributing to social transformation.

Despite the differences in Hays’s and Rendell’s approaches to defining “critical architecture,” both theorists agree that “critical architecture” should not merely reflect existing “culture,” but must instead become a transformative force with the capacity for critique and social change. From this

perspective, “critical architecture” dissolves the boundary between “design” and “criticism,” emerging as a domain in which the creation of space and form becomes a means for social critique and creation. This study demonstrates that “critical architecture” is not only a theoretical concept, but also a practical force capable of playing an active role in social, political, and cultural contexts—offering new possibilities for self-reflectivity and transformation.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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