

# ***THE FINAL REVIEW: NEGATERS GONNA NEGATE***

**Mark Stanley** is a Lecturer & Adjunct Assistant Professor of Architecture at The University of Tennessee College of Architecture and Design and co-founder of StudioMARS, a speculative design-research practice.

The final review is the well-known, cautiously anticipated endgame for the student of architecture—the lonely gazelle steps up in front of the row of (too often male) toothy lions lying lazily back in their shitty folding chairs, still picking their teeth from the last devouring, sipping coffee, trying their best to look disinterested. They have carefully calibrated their postures of indifferent intimidation over years of practice. Most versions of it are sad. This is why, I suspect, architects most often wear black. It's like a sad funeral parade of too-serious, black-clad mourners moving from station to station in search of all the cracks in the work that can be exploited, putting them quickly to bed. “This is where it falls apart”, “You could have done \_\_\_\_\_”, “This is not a thesis”. Students are sleepy (after an incredibly unhealthy lack of rest) and can barely follow the reviewers' comments even if their brains weren't edging on fugue state. They are underfed (on mostly cheap, brown-colored things) and improperly bathed. This seems to set up a series of insurmountable hurdles to a learning moment.

Most review spaces are (oddly enough) much wider than they are deep... this makes the already too-populous panel of critics seem like it stretches infinitely in either direction. And notice next time if you will, the ends of the row of critics seem to pinch in toward the work, as if to trap the prey inside and limit his or her escape. Then there is the perennial problem of the order of the review. The first student is tasked with overcoming the passive distraction of the critics, easing them into the hours-long review from wherever they have been that morning... this is a lot like the first inning of a baseball game: unpopulated, too-hot, and not drunk enough. By the end, it's like closing time at a sketchy nightclub: delirious comments and questionable decisions. Some students loathe the review—they would sooner skip it altogether. But most, I find, have an expectant (if somewhat worried) idea that their work will be judged “good” or “bad” in this moment—that they've done the right thing or they haven't. Students, this is probably the most uninteresting way of thinking about it. The review is about speculation as much as evaluation. Critics are not enemies, and they don't know everything. Admitting a level of uncertainty that necessarily occurs within design education completely changes how one imagines the review moment.

In architecture schools the pedagogical model is, at best I'd say, confused. I like confused; I choose it over certainty when given the chance. In architecture (and most other creative endeavors), students don't learn by way of cataloging information and reciting that information back, as they might in, say, mathematics. In algebra there are rules that simply do not waiver; they are learned, practiced, cataloged, and regurgitated in response to exam questions. This is one of the more efficient ways to learn algebra. In architecture, the pedagogical model is... somewhat different. There, students make things, beautiful things, then attach those things to a wall, where they then gather their peers around and invite more-experienced (often teacherly) voices to respond to those

things. It's kind of odd. And it is notoriously difficult to measure (which I'm also okay with). This slack makes things unknowable, and the review moment is often fraught and confused. People shed tears, they experience euphoria, they drink coffee, they find new capabilities in themselves, they renounce beliefs, they drink coffee.

In many ways architecture review culture mirrors the discipline itself—it sits somewhere in-between the unconstrained, wildly productive studio art review (where students say nothing and the work speaks for itself) and the controlled, disciplinary thesis defense (where the saying of things is as important as anything). It's somewhere between being creative and discursive, between intuition and method, between beautiful and substantial. I revel in the potential of this weird moment. It is the most exciting, most valuable, most vibrant moment in design education, and many of the reasons that make it bad are precisely the reasons that make it good. BUT... this depends entirely on one's approach. Rather than changing the model of the review (even though some changes would be nice... less black clothing), I want to make a case for changing one's approach to what that moment is good for.

There are many things students can do: sleep more, work harder, assume less, fail more... and forget about "right answers"—instead, see how fast and wild the conversation can go (and, as a bonus, how many fights you can start). But we can probably do better by dissecting the psychology of the other constituent party, the critic. There is a surprising amount of pressure on the critic that is impossible to know until you've been one. And pressure from all sides—from the students, from the fellow critics, from the studio instructor, from the discipline, from oneself. Critics are often on trial themselves—to perform in front of friends (or enemies), students, peers, and potential bosses. They are sometimes under scrutiny by senior faculty or administrators (a double layer of critique!). One has to sound smart, after all, and architects are quite good at this. The format of the review seems to beg authority (at least formally): critics are seated, united in authoritative judgment of the student (who stands); the audience sits behind the critics, facing the same direction (the student faces them all)... one could expect to find this spatial organization in a kangaroo court.

The critic must have something truly good to say. And nothing pleases the people like torture. Sadly, there are learned behaviors that pass not only from generation to generation but also virus-like amongst peers, often within one afternoon. Students often can't see the implicit grappling for power and attention that tempts critics in this scenario... and how could they? Their words mean something, both to the student and to those you sit with. One always hopes they are saying valuable things that resonate with The People. This hope is indicative of the struggle with relevance that every architect (and academic) seems to carry around under their arm: "who is listening?, is what I'm saying worth it?, is my work valuable?". The review is a kind of real-time feedback mechanism that tickles this instinct quite well. An affirmative head nod from a fellow critic is often enough to sustain one's impression of themselves for some time. The anxiety over impressing one's audience fades over time—the more reviews one sits on, the less nervous they are, of course—but the pleasure it brings seems to live on in perpetuity. And so, given the background dynamics of this tricky ritual, critics often default to oppositional politics, to lion and gazelle mentality. In the pressure to say something (anything!) worth hearing—something substantial, something expertly, something definitive, something worthy of all the importance my voice has been given in this moment—critics often default to several funny, predictable tropes of response:

1. **Recitation:** “So let me get this straight...”, critic restates everything the student has said, with slight improvements, as a stalling tactic until they have developed a more critical response. This line of questioning is usually cut off by another trope.
2. **Digression:** “I don’t know if this applies at all... but meatballs!”, lack of understanding or attention leads the critic to a long anecdote about something (at most) faintly related to anything the student has said or shown; this is usually followed by a moment of silence before another trope is invoked.
3. **Self-Reference:** “I did this project one time...”, critic uses student work as an opportunity to reference their own work as a better version of what they see on the wall.
4. **Gap-Exploitation:** “This is where it all falls apart...”, critic identifies weakest possible moment in the project and proceeds to hammer on it with increasing force until the rest of the project has crumbled around it (despite promising moments elsewhere); this can also be called “Search and Destroy”.
5. **Simplistic Re-Framing:** “You’re not doing that, you’re doing this...”, critic asserts authority and ownership of the work by dissociating it from the student’s argument and identifying a yet-undiscovered concept.
6. **Accident Investigation:** “I’m not sure if this was intentional...”, critic identifies curious, provocative moment in the process or design and inflects condescension onto their critical domination of a latent concept or design element.
7. **Wish-Fulfillment:** “I wish you would have done \_\_\_\_\_”, critic separates their feedback from the claims of the project in favor of a potential project that does not exist, thereby minimizing their own complicity in the possible other weaknesses of the project in front of them.
8. **Minutia Obsession:** “Are your scale figures correct?...”, critic sidesteps the larger claims of the project in favor of persistently highlighting a clear (yet small) error and refuses to move on.
9. **Esoteric-Re-Reference:** “So the Metabolists already did this, right?...”, critic gains leverage over student by nullifying the work through quick, simplistic reference to previous architectural projects that the student does not know (or knows only vaguely).
10. **Cronyism:** “If I can piggyback on what he said...”, critics find fulfillment in joining forces with one another against the student’s work in a united dead-horse beating contest.
11. **Outright Asshole-ism:** “I won’t waste my time talking about this...”, critic makes no attempt towards a productive exchange, opting instead for careless and insulting remarks. This trope is rare but also the most infuriating.

One of my all time great teachers, Jason Young, once told us (I’ll paraphrase) that one should employ a policy of acceleration in design, as opposed to the policy of negation. Negation is a standard practice in architecture. Negaters gonna negate, as they say. It is surprisingly easy to see design work and respond negatively; this is why it happens so often. Picking out the problems, the shortcomings, the weaknesses is much, much easier than finding the potentials, the explosions, the excitements. In short, for a critic, making nothing out of a design project is easier than making something out of it. Maybe this says something about design, or maybe just the human condition, but it is an act of design itself to see a project and accelerate it forward as a critic, spinning it faster than it ever thought it would go, accelerating a thing forward into grounds that it has not yet anticipated. And let’s be clear: acceleration does not mean nicety. It actually means

responding to the work more critically—doing more work as a critic. Speculating on possible outcomes makes spotting a hole in the work a productive moment, instead of a corrective one.

Our review culture says things about our design culture. On the one hand, I have had many teachers and many colleagues who escape the simplistic tropes mentioned above. Those people are critical but kind, projective, and speculative, and they are also the best teachers I have ever known. But on the other hand, the negative and oppositional politics of the review set up a simplistic mentality where students expect “right answers” and authorization of their work... it stifles their creativity and design agency. Architecture and architects have trouble coping with the in-between-ness of the review moment, of their own discipline, of themselves. Architects live and work in an ambiguous set of practices that may not resolve into neat, coherent wholes. I’m okay with that; I hope others are. This is messy, and it requires some risks, both by students and by critics (and somewhere ambiguously in-between, teachers). And so, in this review season, I’ll hold out hope that the accelerators win the day. If not, don’t worry; you’ll have fun with the drinking game that accompanies the list above.