**Architectural Flirtations, formerly known as critique**

Dethroning “the serious” to clear ground for generous architectural conversations  

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**Abstract**  
With this chapter, I aim to briefly describe and position the key concepts that form the central idea of my forthcoming dissertation, *I hate architecture <3: Architectural Flirtations, formerly known as critique*. It explores the words I use in the (working) title, “architectural”, “flirtations” and “critique,” in relation to ideas about architects and their formation, staked out by Dana Cuff in her chapter “The Making of an Architect” from 1991. In revisiting the central aspects that contribute to making a culture of architects, what Cuff describes as ‘enculturation’, “…a process that transforms layperson into architect through the knowledge, experience, and authority gained over the course of a career,” with a specific focus on education, I propose an intentional and continuous displacing of “the center,” as a strategy to “clear ground” for more ethical, socially-conscious and generous architectural conversations.  
**Keywords:** architectural, flirtation, critique, Camp, queer

Beyond experimentation with form, language and content in my own scholarly texts, through the (now) relatively established writing methodology *critical fiction*, I work to achieve a performative mode of research in the staging, presentation and conversation around the writing, as well. As a parallel story throughout this text, I describe one such example of *architectural flirtations* and my “queer Camp tactics,” with a series of images from my 50% PhD seminar.  

**Architectural**

Why do I insist on using the word “architectural”? Situated within what Jane Rendell describes as one of the five thematics of current feminist critical spatial practices - *performativity*, my work is most often a joining of feminist, literary and architectural disciplines within a theatrical guise, “to explore the ‘position’ of the writer through the spatial and *material* qualities of the text.”¹ I write stories as an architect, about architects, within and around architecture, inspired by architectural encounters and phenomena. At times, I would even claim that I write architecturally, but it is absolutely a creative and an interdisciplinary endeavor. Cuff writes, “Becoming an architect is about becoming an artist, but a peculiar kind of artist who stays within certain boundaries… The process of becoming an architect is one of learning *socially appropriate avenues* for creativity.”²
I understand Cuff’s intention of evoking the figure of “the artist” as an example of an autonomous individual, in order to emphasize the incongruity of architecture’s strong identification with and lingering myth of the lone creative (male) genius, in relation to the collective teams necessary to do the actual work. She points to an unresolved conflict between a perceived freedom in the process of design and the more constraining practical aspects of business associated with professional practice. Cuff admittedly notes in her text that even most art practices must resolve these very same conflicting roles she is referring to, but states that she uses a “stereotypical artist” in order to get at the way most architects are fostered to see themselves primarily as the “architect-artist”, rather than identifying with their managerial or collaborative roles. Although Jane Rendell describes a more complex understanding of artistic practice and collaboration, and focuses specifically on interdisciplinary work that offers “a critical feminist alternative to conventional architectural practice,” could it be these certain boundaries and socially appropriate avenues mentioned by Cuff, designating the limitations of the discipline, that Rendell finds constricting in her desire to expand the field through the use of the term “critical spatial practice,” leaving the term “architectural” behind?

While I empathize and agree with Rendell’s call for a more interdisciplinary perspective and expansion of the field of architecture, I wonder if there might be another way to approach it? My concern is that in giving up the term “architectural,” work done under the epithet “spatial” may be relegated to the margins, leaving the bastion of architecture located firmly at “the center,” unchanged. Since the word “architectural” is directly associated to the discipline I intend to affect, Architecture, and because I recognize this inherent association with power, I choose strategically to call any and everything I do “architectural.” In the conclusion of her text on critical spatial practices, Jane Rendell stresses the continued importance in making explicit references to feminism, in order not to “partake in the act of obscuring feminism’s political imperative” in an attempt to find “less oppositional ways of being feminist”. In a similar manner, I would suggest that “contemporary feminist practitioners interested in architecture” cannot afford to give up the term “architectural,” if the intention is to change it.

Flirtations
Beyond the matter of terminology, I address “serious” issues, specific but perhaps not exclusive, to the architectural community, profession and educational institutions through architectural flirtations. My work focuses primarily on the education and formation of young architects through pedagogical practices that touch upon different areas within the architectural discipline, such as research, pedagogy and professional practice. As an adaptation of Gavin Butt’s notion of scholarly flirtations- a way to challenge the seriousness of traditional forms of critical writing
through playful experimentation, without worrying so much about possible failure or outcomes, *architectural flirtations* extend the scope to include not only critical writing, but also architectural design and pedagogical forms of design education. In the development of this “queer Camp methodology” or mode of working, my aim is to question and find new ways of approaching the habits of an architectural culture, even those of critical or feminist critique within that culture.

Shifting the positions of a typical research seminar to enact this fictional course, my role as PhD candidate became “head instructor,” my academic advisors became “training supervisors,” my “opponent” starred as the “special guest affiliate,” while my former students and friends, who helped guide those attending, became my “Flirt Aid staff.” Everyone received a white lab coat and a Flirt Aid Kit at the door and were asked to replace their outerwear with this “course uniform,” to bring everyone into the scene.

Both the Flirt Aid Kit and the “official” certificate participants receive at the end of the course are Campy, equally silly as they are serious, but the message they carry is not uncritical: Architecture is in critical condition and in dire need of Flirt Aid!

*Architectural- and Scholarly flirtations* are similar in their intent to undermine the reproduction of power within “serious” or traditional subjects, and/or approaches to these subjects, through an act of queer scholarship that is purposefully “improper” and contingent. However, while Butt’s *scholarly flirtations* remain concentrated on the study of contemporary art and performance, I see a potential in the flirtatious performative act itself as a mode of doing, applicable to the field of architectural design and pedagogy and pertinent to the self-critique of critical design research. More specifically, Butt is interested in the possible knowledge production of these flirtatious experiences and the ways this knowledge may be recounted, while I am perhaps more concerned with what the actual space of contingency can offer, in the moment this knowledge is being produced. In the performative mode, the difference is between talking *about* something or actually *doing* it. It is my attempt to take “seriously,” and develop, the line of questioning Gavin Butt initiates.

In reference to a quotation from Adam Phillips’ book *On Flirtation*, Gavin Butt reminds us, “The fact that people tend to flirt only with serious things—madness, disaster, other people—and the fact that flirting is a pleasure, makes it a relationship, a way of doing things, worth considering.” I am interested in this “way of doing things” that contributes to the formation of an architectural community in general, but more specifically, in the practices that aim to produce critical architectural works. Cuff writes, “…the metamorphosis from layperson to architect tells us much about how the architectural profession sees itself. As a group teaches its prospective members
how to belong, the observer grasps the important traits of the culture.” The status of culture implies that the correct “way of doing things” has become established, hence deemed professional or serious, and therefore rarely questioned or even noticed, as a habit from a certain time and place. It is “the center,” and its influence extends to all aspects of the culture it represents. Again Cuff, “It is my contention that the social context of a work of architecture is at least as influential as the properties of building materials or the building site.” How might flirtation provide a disruption or displacement of this “center,” and suggest other “ways of doing things”?

In her “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag writes “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious.” One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.” Gavin Butt suggests that Sontag’s text can be seen as a “staging of a provisionality,” as if she will at a later stage write a more “serious” scholarly article. Sontag performs the indeterminable quality of Camp- its reluctance to be pinned down or defined in its tension between the serious and the frivolous, by making a list. In this way, “Notes on Camp” performs an act of flirtatious writing. I am interested in both the performative flirtatious act, as well as the flirtational intention to disrupt the habits of a culture, in order to find “a more complex relation to ‘the serious’.” If I return to the words I use, the main part of my title is performative, in that it does the actual flirting. “I hate architecture” makes a direct, demonstrative statement, while the heart at the end “<3” performs a textual wink. It indicates that the statement may perhaps not be taken at face value. There’s something else going on here! Immediately, the question arises.

Should I take this seriously, or not?
In place of the typical slideshow presentation of my work, together we built a living diagram or a Campy version of the *tableau vivant*, around a copious, kitschy table of snacks and sweets, including the chocolate fountain centerpiece that filled the room with a distinct chocolate aroma. Once the diagram was complete, we then ate parts of it, as the table also provided refreshments during the short intermission. Again, this constant turning things on their end, to allow a state of anticipation and uncertainty, helps to perpetuate the atmosphere where “the serious” is constantly countered with “Should I take this seriously, or not?”

The strength of other important queer-feminist performative work, such as that of my colleague, now advisor, Katarina Bonnevier, along with her colleagues Thérèse Kristiansson and Mariana Alves, in the art and architecture collective MYCKET, most directly inspires and influences me as a clear example of shifting the rules of engagement and challenging “the serious” within architectural practice, as well as in architectural scholarship. They make rooms of love (and sex), safe spaces, or what Katarina sometimes refers to as the “kindly disposed room,” most often for and with groups located outside of what is usually considered “the center.” Jane Rendell notes “the rise of interdisciplinary and practice-led research,” where the tendency of contemporary
feminist practitioners “…highlights an interest not only in the end product, but in the process of designing itself, pointing to the importance of the dialogue between theory and practice in architecture.” This interest in the performative act of research, and the desire to combine practice and theory, is something we both share; however, I also see an important distinction between our work in the way change is brought about.

My colleagues’ work is direct, it’s “in-your-face,” and it aims (and usually manages) to create temporary utopias or places that allow and encourage other ways of being in the world. One specific example is their Club Scene events, where they reconstruct and reenact historical queer clubs from around the world, experimenting with performance through spaces, scenography, costumes, and bodies. The recurring usage of slogans like “Every Time We Fuck We Win”, a phrase borrowed from The Queer Nation Manifesto (1990) and used by MYCKET as both posters and “guerrilla” flyers in several of these events, is one detail that speaks of the very clear urgency in their work.18 It’s voracious, there’s an appetite for victory and there are no apologies! They make space, and although there may be some flirtation involved, I’m not certain that it is ultimately about the flirt. Perhaps it is closer to seduction, as there is a clear desire for resolve, even if the result is fleeting.

Architectural flirtations, on the other hand, make space within acts of anticipation and contingency, regardless of the outcome. In contrast to a more confrontational, “in-your-face” approach, the flirt engages in a playful displacement of “the center,” pulling and pushing it around like the lead in an enticing dance, eventually dissolving the defining edges of “the center” to expand what “the center” might include.19 In this way, the space it makes is less defined and more like “clearing ground.” Sara Ahmed describes a similar act of “clearing ground” as she proposes that “orientation is a matter of how we reside or how we clear space that is familiar,” in order to “put some things and not others in reach.”20 She borrows a term from Teresa de Lauretis, “habit-change,” to describe the queer act of re-orientation in order to bring those things (and people) that were previously unavailable in a “conventional genealogy,” within reach.21 It is this act of “reorienting,” or decentering, brought about by the flirt that I pose as a possibility for instigating change in the habits of an architectural culture.
A “habit-change” may be as simple as changing the way a space is arranged, what’s in that space, or how it is used. During each phase of the seminar, the room was rearranged to accommodate the mode of activity: presentation, intermission, conversation.

I would argue that “other ways of doing things” and “alternative ways of understanding” took place in this transformed architectural office during the Flirt Aid Course.

While there are strengths and weaknesses in both of these approaches, depending on the situation, I would suggest that the flirt is perhaps particularly applicable to pedagogical situations. One of its clear advantages is that, although it does make demands, it doesn’t exclude what is already in the center. In other words, it’s not only useful for the “queer kid” (or any position(s) that understands itself as being outside of “the center”) who is perhaps searching for a role model and a place to belong, but also seeks out the future architectural critic, already schooled in the culture of the architectural profession, who may have a direct affect on that very same “queer kid” in a pin-up.

*Warning! The three previously mentioned spheres within an architectural culture or discipline; research, pedagogy, and the profession, each have their own “centers” or habits that are different and that at times may overlap or even displace each other, so flirtations must always be situated. Likewise, the position of “the flirt” is subject to the prevailing hierarchies at work in specific situations, so the possibility for- and effectiveness of a flirtation may be dependent on gender, skin color, sexuality, class... and any combination thereof. Flirting tactics must be adjusted accordingly.

In her trilogy on teaching, bell hooks describes engaged pedagogical settings, not as so-called “safe spaces” where everyone agrees, but rather as spaces that “know how to cope in situations of risk”. And yes, flirtation is risky, in its inherent vulnerability in not knowing how things might turn out, as “the center” is always slippery and reluctant to give up its privileges. Butt notes, “Flirtation may be deemed ‘weak’ by dint of its pleasurable embrace of uncertainty and doubt.” However, in these particular instances, I would argue that the “in-your-face” approach is perhaps likely to trigger a complete shutting down-shutting out effect, creating even further distances between what is in “the center” and what is not. To be clear, situations of architectural flirtations are not (only) about having fun and getting along. They are about creating the situations where risk is possible. There’s no lack of precision, but rather it is “precisely improper.”

It is important to note another type of risk with flirtation, mentioned by Gavin Butt, in relation to gender. He writes “in the context of [Simmel’s] patriarchal heterosexism, all flirts are women.” Cuff discusses questions of gender in terms of what she calls “the competitive arena” established
in the three elements shared by most architectural programs, the studio, the crit and the charrette. She describes the “macho” qualities built-in to the charrette forms of working as “endurance tests” where students are expected to “temporarily sacrifice everything for the sake of their projects” and likens the architectural school to a “designer boot camp.” Although students of all genders may (and do) participate equally in this “competitive arena,” there remain assumptions connected to gender marked situations, such as the masculinity of boot camp, that potentially place the flirt into a stereotypical gender role of the feminine, where the “weak” or uncertain tactics are perceived as inferior or second-rate. In other words, they can be easily dismissed as not being up to par for the demands of a tough and competitive environment. It is therefore important to stress the queer position of the flirt, where gender and desire are not linked in a simplistic binary manner and have a more complex relation to “the serious.” By complicating the gender/desire chain, while retaining the “weak” or uncertain character of the flirt, the reproduction of power is undermined and assumptions or habits around situations deemed “serious” acquire a Campy-ness, shifting the grunts and elbowing of a boot camp into the songs and choreography of a Broadway musical.

Fig. 15, 16 and 17 Meeting the characters and building the living diagram

The theatrical aspects of the seminar created situations where it was ok to play, even be silly, while still getting serious academic work done.
When Forbes asked one of my own flirtatious role models, former Star Trek actor, Broadway musical director and current LGBTQ activist/social media phenomenon, George Takei, about his approach that combines very serious struggles with what can be seen as frivolous Campy tactics, his answer struck a chord with me. “I think the serenity at the heart of the Buddhist philosophy has allowed me to combat injustice and inequality with a certain level of patient perspective. It’s so necessary to engage those who would seek to oppress you, and to extend to them a hand in our common humanity. That’s the philosophy I try to maintain on the Facebook page—with a few adorable and irresistible cat pictures, of course.” He extends his hand and invites “the center” up for a dance, but maintains the lead by adding the flirtatious uncertainty of never really knowing what can be taken seriously. I would suggest that this “dance” doesn’t resemble a sexy salsa or a sophisticated tango, it’s a full-on flirtatious, parodic disco! Sontag writes, “Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character.’” It is this shift of ethos from judging to relishing that I am interested in. In her call for an “ethics of love,” bell hooks writes, “Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience… When we choose to love we choose to move against fear - against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect- to find ourselves in the other.” Architectural flirtations operate in a mode of generosity, rather than the alienation of critique.

My guest, Katie Lloyd Thomas from Newcastle University, played right along with me, giving accounts of her own relationship to flirtation, while the 4-5 written pages of comments I received afterwards had chocolate smudges on them- traces of the flirt.

Fig. 18 “Special guest affiliate”- a.k.a. opponent (above)
Fig. 19 Chocolate fountain (left)

Critique

“As the terminology indicates, crits are not two-way discussions: for the most part, students are the passive recipients of jurors’ opinions. As a ritual, the crit teaches students that their work should be able to stand the test of harsh professional criticism, doled out by those with greater experience. It offers a model of professional behavior, implying that full-fledged architects hold positions that can be challenged only by other full-fledged architects (other jurors) and not by the public, other professionals or clients.” In proposing a shift from critique to conversation, brought about by architectural flirtations, my intentions are two-fold.

1) To encourage situations of evaluation where the focus is on dialogical learning (i.e. everyone involved). I use the term “conversation” as a combination of discourse and practice, as both a discursive act and a way to be in dialogue through doing. The crucial part, for me, is the exchange. For instance, in writing or making, if I am “in conversation with” a reference, whether
contemporary or historical, neither of us is left unchanged, whereas, a critique of this same reference, doesn’t necessarily require any revision on my part. It simply proves a point. The same applies to a crit situation, between critic and student. So, the dance of architectural flirtation is “to be in conversation with.”

2) To problematise the concept of “critique” or “criticism” and flirt out assumptions perhaps overlooked in the critical architectural project, where I locate my own work. Butt suggests “Flirtation might therefore be seen as model for practices of criticism – where it seems necessary and germane – to decentre the paranoid structures of serious analysis, or indeed to re-inflect them with a flirtatious, and playful, form of knowing.” The dance of architectural flirtation is also “a way of knowing.”

Throughout the seminar, participants were encouraged to trade costumes at will and explore different positions. At the end of the seminar, rather than opening up for general questions, we made a round to give everyone a chance to say something.

Like a conversation, a flirt is dependent on the interaction of more than one part. It isn’t a one-way relationship; otherwise the flirt begins to resemble a stalker, and the conversation an interrogation. In his argument for scholarly flirtations as a way to fulfil an ethical imperative “by transforming, or disrupting, the habitually sober performativity of critical writing,” Gavin Butt refers to the work of queer literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her claim that paranoia has become the standard mode of operation for critical theorists, a kind of critical auto-pilot. Sedgwick describes paranoia as a strong theory, concerned with certainty, knowledge in the form of exposure, and operating within a negative affective register (e.g. seriousness). She explains that while paranoia may know some things very well, it may simply “[blot] out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand.” Consider, for a moment, the architectural critic, or even the critical researcher, fostered within the culture of criticism described by Dana Cuff. What is the likelihood that the critical tends toward a similar mode of operation, where paranoia guards “the center” of a privileged position?

If architectural flirtations are to offer another “way of doing things” where “alternative ways of understanding” are not lost, it is important to point out that the proposed decentering of “the serious” does not preclude the presence of the critical. As Sedgwick notes “…to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression.” Flirtations complicate things for the critical that has fallen into habit, whether in an act of securing its own position or in routinely following practices that it has come to rely on. Flirtations get in the way, functioning almost like a critical killjoy, and likely for
some, an irritation, as not everyone likes to “dance.” What would a generous architectural conversation look like, if we were to extend a hand to “the serious” culture of architecture and invite it up to a Campy dance in disco form? With one steel point placed precisely on the hip of curiosity, the other arm draws a sweeping arc towards imagination. The weight shifts, as the steel point now moves to rest on the other swaying hip of vulnerability, and the second arm swoops around in a deep curve toward empowerment and stretches upward into its power pose.

In a (queer) feminist future, there is an(other) flirtatious architectural culture of conversations. An architectural scholarship that values playfulness, impropriety and uncertainty. An architectural education that encourages generosity, collaboration and exchange. An architectural profession that understands privilege, uses power ethically, and doesn’t take itself so damn seriously!

Should YOU take this seriously, or not?

References


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1 Rendell, 37.

2 Cuff, 154. (my italics for emphasis)

3 Cuff, 11.

4 Cuff, 40.

5 Rendell, 17-20.

6 Here, I am using "architecture with a capital A" to signify a self-perpetuating patriarchal discipline and culture that is in need of change.

7 Rendell, 39-40.

8 Rendell, 20.

9 Butt.

10 Phillips, xvii.

11 Cuff, 111. I use Cuff’s analysis of design education as reference points to better define the type of pedagogy my work is relating to, a “dominant model,” although I am aware that there are exceptions to more traditional pedagogical practices. In his recent article, my colleague Anders Bergström also makes the case for the continued relevance of Dana Cuff’s text to the current state of architectural education. See Anders Bergström, 2014. “Architecture And The Rise Of Practice In Education”, Architectural Theory Review, 19:1, 10-21.

12 Cuff, 116.

13 Sontag, 288.

14 Butt.

15 The notion of Camp may also be risky in its associations to a privileged class, as well as to a celebration of consumerism, playing into the hands of exclusion and capitalism. A more thorough exploration of the possible risks of Camp, as well as my uses of Camp, will be further developed in an expanded version of this text for my dissertation. Thank you to my colleague Catharina Gabrielson for raising the potential conflict in the use of Camp in work that aspires to critique the status quo of contemporary neoliberal culture, with capitalist-driven models for institutions of higher learning.

16 MYCKET is an architecture and art collective initiated in 2012. See [http://mycket.org](http://mycket.org).

17 Rendell, 20.

18 Rosenberg, 167-178.

19 Many thanks to Marie-Louise Richards for the conversation that helped clarify my own thinking around the similarities and differences between my work and MYCKET’s!

20 Ahmed 2006, 552-554.

21 Ahmed 2006, 564.

22 hooks 2010, 87.

23 Butt.

24 Butt.

25 Cuff, 128.

26 In an email to all faculty of the School of Architecture at KTH on April 28, 2014, Marie Ekblad- equality representative, and Molly Sjögren- head of the student council, reminded teachers and administrators that “The image of the architect as a man is a problem that continues to permeate the profession today, and if this is ever to change, everyone must consciously work toward that goal.” This reinforces the continued need for change and addressing issues of gender, power and the notions of the figure of “the architect.”

27 Knapp.

28 Sontag, 291.

29 hooks 2000, 93.

30 Cuff, 126.

31 Butt.

32 Butt.

33 Sedgwick, 131.

34 Sedgwick, 128.

35 For more on ”feminist killjoys” see Ahmed 2010.