1. A Passionate Protest

Except at rare intervals of intellectual ferment, education in the past has been radically infected with inert ideas. That is the reason why uneducated clever women, who have seen much of the world, are in middle life so much the most cultured part of the community. They have been saved from this horrible burden of inert ideas. *Every intellectual revolution which has ever stirred humanity into greatness has been a passionate protest against inert ideas.* (Whitehead 1967: 2; my emphasis)

2. What are Radical Pedagogies?

Radical pedagogies are taken here to be experimental forms of learning that are engaged with an on-going and passionate protest against inert ideas. It is education of and for vitality – learning how to intensify ones capacity to live affirmatively, and with singularity of style. For any such pursuit, the degree to which pedagogical and research cultures can accommodate diversity and difference is critical – this is vital for keeping them alive and kicking. Cultures and ideas become inert when internal difference, specificity, and situated attention is stamped out of them, or stifled. When this happens, they have perhaps been smothered by what Brian Massumi refers to as “objective
illusions,” which arise when there is “a conditioned failure to register the full singularity of the occasion... The new situation is erroneously experienced as being more similar to a class of other events than it is different in its own occurrence” (Massumi 2015: 97). This is somewhat like, say, arriving out of the lift onto level 6 of a building for the first time and making the mistake of thinking you are on level 4, where you have been before. They appear identical. Sometimes architects go out of their way to encourage objective illusions. A radical pedagogy would go out of its way to pull the difference out from under the blanket of apparent sameness and homogeneity.

3. The Question of Critique

The activity of critique can be important as part of a process of articulating the differences inherent to cultural/pedagogical assemblages, such that they can be recognized, acknowledged, and fed. Promoting critique as an important aspect of radical pedagogies is not without its risks, however. Commonly understood to occur from a position of distance from the subject under assessment, traditional critique can tend to have a whiff of ‘objective illusion’ about it, denying it’s own singularity in order to chalk up some staged authority. Furthermore, critique is largely assumed to function solely through words – via the medium of writing or in the verbal feedback of, say, a design jury or a panel of examiners. This essay takes 10 steps toward exploring how this is not the only way critique can do its job of fostering the recognition and articulation of difference, and that critique can work in favor of unsettling inert ideas when it operates through an aesthetically or affectively driven ecology of means.

4. Architecture’s Radical Pedagogies

The discipline of architecture has a long history of ‘radical pedagogies’, as mapped out and penned under the guidance of Beatriz Colomina’s Radical

Pedagogies project, with exhibition and web site: http://radical-pedagogies.com
This historical survey is an inspiring resource if thinking about alternatives to normative educational models, albeit also a tale of the brevity of many brave pedagogical experiments. They may have flickered to life and petered away in experimental expiration, but not before instigating some deep and enduring changes.

In more contemporary settings, a passionate protest against inert ideas is implicitly embedded in the tri-polar model that shaped the research culture of RMIT’s School of Architecture and Design, as championed by Leon van Schaik:

innovative communities of practice tend to thrive when at least three alternative and differentiated positions are actively operating as part of the constitution of that culture. (van Schaik 2013: 108)

The complexity of at-least-three-bodies-in-relation becomes even more dynamic and unpredictable when, inevitably, those bodies are neither distinct nor static in their definition. The School’s vibrant PhD program is dedicated to research that proceeds primarily through the ‘medium’ of creative activity. Rather than resting research laurels entirely on the more conventional primacy and authority of the text, or in the more pre-rationalized, pre-determined models of research methodology, this mode of research activity celebrates the emergent, the unanticipated and the singular. Practitioners from around the world, who are often very established architects, designers, and artists, probe the very particular nature of their design practice, and offer their careful articulations as knowledge about and for design process. Graduates of this program commonly report that their practices become energized through this process.

5. An Architectural Act

Fig. 1 The Design Hub, southeast corner. RMIT University, Melbourne. Image Credit: Pia Ednie-Brown.

RMIT’s design research facility, The Design Hub (Fig. 1), was designed by Sean Godsell Architects and opened in 2012. The building is compositionally and sculpturally powerful and is a multi-award winning architectural project. Its spectacular presence, however, encompasses many a challenge to its inhabitants.

It has a tendency to interfere with normal functioning: repetitively patterned wall surfaces produce distracting visual effects (that amplify the longer you stay with them), power points become difficult to access under heavy, unwieldy metal floor grills, the acoustics frequently render group communication difficult, and the list goes on. The repeated floor plates and formal insistence upon uncompromising repetition has led me, on more than one occasion, to become confused about which floor of the building I am indeed on; it is one strong example of an architecture that promotes the ‘objective illusion’ referred to earlier (step 2).

The monumental scale of its spaces and of its efforts of composition can be difficult to relax with. For instance, the primary exhibition space is often found to be daunting in scale and was described, during the opening speeches of a major exhibition, as “phenomenally scary” to negotiate as a curator. Litanies of inconvenience and intimidation sit within the affective impact of a relentlessly consistent formal composition. Overall, the building may be felt both positively, perhaps as inspiring, uplifting, and sublime, and negatively, perhaps as frustrating, diminishing, and oppressive. Anecdotally, responses vary across this spectrum, even from a single person. Clearly, there is something contestable at stake. It makes and stakes a position with such clarity that it renders obvious the fact that buildings don’t just sit there, inertly. They act. Their actions are what you might call ‘virtual movements’. The actuality of these virtual movements counter those inert ideas that a radical pedagogy passionately protests against. At one level, the Design Hub screams with passion. But if you move to another level, the scream sounds unnervingly identical (echoing with ‘objective illusion’).

6. Building Movements

6.1. Aiming to prompt an exploratory engagement with this architectural character, I assembled a workshop called Building Movements in 2013 with colleagues and PhD candidates. Jondi Keane, Lyndal Jones and myself led some

discussions and performative exercises (Fig. 2), some of which drew on past Senselab events (such as ‘conceptual speed dating’).

Fig. 2 Building Movements workshop; exploring the pace of the courtyard stairs. Image Credit: Pia Ednie-Brown.

6.2. The momentum of this workshop moved into a group exhibition seven weeks later, consisting of works produced to act with or in response to the building. The invitation to exhibit set out the following challenges and questions:

What does it [The Design Hub] ask of us, what challenges does it raise, and what potential does it offer – with its sculptural presence, linear spatial momentum, minimalist interiors, relentless circular motifs, monumental spaces, rules and restrictions of use, its views and adjacencies, its community of inhabitants, amongst other things – ? If the building poses challenges and questions to its inhabitants, we can also challenge the building by posing questions of our own – entering into an active dialogue with this building-creature that matures as we develop ways to be with (and part of) it.

6.3. A series of installations, produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, were pressed up against the lift opening on four floors of the building. From inside the lift, when the door opened you were presented with a surprising spatial encounter that required negotiating (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 The view from inside the lift as it opened onto two of the installations (Building Movements 1 and 2). Designed and produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, 2013. Image Credit: Georgina Matherson.

Following Arakawa and Gins’ notion of the ‘architectural procedure’ (Arakawa & Gins 2002), these works have been discussed in terms of a ‘tentativeness extending procedure’: each extended the threshold condition of the lift by attenuating the tentativeness often found in that experience of transitional movement and social awkwardness as one moves between one floor and another.

The process of designing and constructing these four installations was offered a narrative voice through a fifth project (Building Movements 5): a website designed by Olivia Pintos-Lopez (Fig. 6). All those involved were invited to upload notes, images, etc., from the process into a field of scrollable ‘windows’: http://www.collectivecommons.net. The process through which the installations came into being becomes palpable in spending time meandering from window to window, and scrolling through their diverse contents. The site was in part a documentation tool, but its contribution operates more in terms of asserting a counterpoint to any idea that the exhibition was only about the resulting installation entities.
Fig. 6 Screen shot from web site (Building Movements 5), designed by Olivia Pintos-Lopez, 2013. http://www.collectivecommons.net

6.3.1. The first of these installations, *Building Movements 1*, was a perforated metal cube on wheels (Fig. 7), positioned tightly inside another cube. Materially a continuation of the lift space, it required pushing in order to make a space just big enough to squeeze around and out (Fig. 8). Poignantly, the layers of perforated metal produced a moiré pattern of larger circles, that appear at first to be created by light through the façade circles of the Design Hub (Fig. 9).

Fig. 8 Movie-still of movement from the lift through the *Building Movements 1* installation. Designed and produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, 2013. Image Credit: Georgina Matherson.

Fig. 9 Circular moiré formations; *Building Movements 1* installation – with the building façade circles visible behind. Designed and produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, 2013. Image Credit: Chris Cottrell.

6.3.2. *Building Movements 2* presented lift travellers with a flight of stairs that led up to a space too short to stand up in, such that as you went up, you gradually

crouched down (Fig. 10); and then down again into a miniaturized waiting room, set up with small chairs, a desk and visitors book, a small painting on the wall and a telephone (Fig. 11). While retaining a strong sense of the highly normative and familiar, this was somewhat like an Alice in Wonderland experience of changing scales of reference and being caught in the deep threshold of an alternative form of sense-making.

Fig. 10 Looking up from the lift to the compressed space at the top of the Building Movements 2 installation stairs. Designed and produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, 2013. Image Credit: Georgina Matherson.

Fig. 11 The down flight and waiting room areas of the *Building Movements 2* installation. Designed and produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, 2013. Image Credit: Georgina Matherson.

6.3.3. *Building Movements 3* (Fig. 12), welcomed the lift traveller into an inflatable room made of translucent plastic, with another layer of plastic circles bound to its surface. Like a soft version of the hard Hub, this space drew attention to the rigidity of the Hub’s volumetric architectonics, and to the otherwise less noticeable movements of air – it would inflate and deflate a little every time the lift opened onto it, and when people exited the inflatable through a slit in its side.

Fig. 12 The inflatable Building Movements 3 installation, entered from the lift. Designed and produced by Scott Andrew Elliott, Chris Cottrell, and Olivia Pintos-Lopez, with a group of architecture and interior design students, 2013. Image Credit: Georgina Matherson.

6.3.4. *Building Movements 4* (Fig. 13), was an array of hanging videotape strips that formed a rectangular volume of the same shape and size as the lift interior, but rotated 90 degrees onto its side. On exiting the lift, one’s head becomes immersed in this volume of hanging strips, which would tend to get sucked up one’s nose and into the mouth when breathing. Like the inflatable, it produced another soft, airborne density that resonated with the building visually, this time with the hard grey metal mesh that relentlessly lines the building interior. If one felt at all oppressed by the building’s relentlessness, this installation resonated with that feeling via a sensed risk of suffocation.

6.4. A related opening up of the apparently inert was enacted in a different and powerful way through Adele Varcoe’s raucous and colorful *Bikini Party* performance (Fig. 14). This party of girls, colorfully dressed in bikinis and blow-ups, with loud music playing and beers in hand, travelled up and down the lifts, creating a contrast with, and thereby illuminating, the somber and serious tone of the building. The throb of music and the sounds of screaming girls travelling

up and down the lift-shaft could be heard on all floors, literally pumping life into the building by giving it a racy heartbeat, while highlighting its otherwise muted vitality.

Fig. 14 Bikini Party performance installation, by Adele Varcoe, 2013. Image Credit: Georgina Matherson.

6.5 James Carey’s *Hub Detritus* captured and exhibited footage of himself sweeping up dust and detritus on 3 floors of the building (Fig. 15) – each with its attitude of sameness and streamlined, modernist cleanliness. He used the material collected from each floor to produce ‘paintings’ on circular canvasses (Fig. 16). Each one reveals traces of different kinds of activities that had eventfully occurred on each level: the differences hidden under the assertively designed objective illusion of each floor, swept out from under the carpet (or, more precisely, from the recesses of the negative detailing).

![Fig. 15](image)

**Fig. 15** James Carey sweeping one of the floors of the Design Hub, collecting detritus, 2013. Image Credit: James Carey.

6.6 Zuzana Kovar’s *Transfer Pillows* (Fig. 17) sat quietly, apparently as rather polite pillows offering relief from the hardness of the built-in benches. However, having being made with graphite paper these pillows would leave traces on those who touched them. This work aimed to explore the blurring of body and space that takes place at the level of matter. As a building that presents itself in a manner that emphasises form over and above material/matter, this piece offered a subtle counter-play.

6.7. Nicholas Skepper’s *Graphite Curtain* (Fig. 18) occupied a space between architectural drawing and architectural device. Rolls of 3.6m long graphite paper, generally used for transferring information from one piece of paper to another, were perforated by hand through a laborious process of repetitively puncturing the surface. These became ‘curtains’ when hung from the ceiling, blowing in the internal breeze, and shimmering in concert with the grey tones of the interior. The small, circular perforations worked with light in a manner that resonated with the grid of circular disks on the façade, albeit with a softness and irregularity not present in the building. By exploring the threshold between drawing and building, Skepper highlights the ideational nature of architecture: the way in which ideas are drawn out on paper and come to persist in multiple, physical forms.

6.8. Two pieces by myself and Jondi Keane also played with the circular motif of the building. The RHub (Fig. 19) was a pencil drawing on the concrete floor, where a circle template was used to produce a field of circles with varying diameter nestled against one another. This played off against the grid of façade circles hung at 90 degrees from the floor, but this time with considerable variation in diameter and without the gridded regularity.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 19** The RHub, Pia Ednie-Brown and Jondi Keane, 2013. Pencil on concrete floor. Image Credit: Pia Ednie-Brown.

An enormous ‘huge mistakes’ eraser was hung from the ceiling with thick string, such that it could erase the circle drawing, but only within the circular limits allowed by the reach of the string. At the exhibition opening, a thick, circular smudge of graphite became smeared across the floor (Fig 20). The second piece, Space-Time Twister (Fig. 21), was a game derived from the popular party game, Twister. The standard grid of colored circles on the Twister game mat, upon which people twisted themselves, was loosened into an irregular distribution of

these circles. The spin disk that determined the placements of players’ hands and feet on the circles was adapted into a clock, such that movements on the mat were constantly changing to the tune of the ticking of time (Fig. 22). Both these pieces aimed to play out, through performative means, tensions between variation and repetition, both spatially and temporally.

![Image Credit: Pia Ednie-Brown.](image)

**Fig. 20** The RHub, Pia Ednie-Brown and Jondi Keane, 2013. Circular smudges made with hanging eraser, after opening of exhibition. Image Credit: Pia Ednie-Brown.

6.9. With a wry smile, I had a grid of paper doilies taped to the glass, in dialogue with the circular, translucent glass disks that constitute the building façade (Fig. 23). The simultaneous contrast and similarity between their frilly tiveness and the building’s minimalist aspirations bought a smile to many faces.

7. The Choir of a Regulatory Compliance Regime

All these works enacted various kinds of engaged critique through attunements and willful mis-attunements with selected aspects of the building’s presence. But if all these works each enact a form of critique, it was not only the actions of their final, exhibited form that mattered. The very situated, material properties of this kind of critique integrally involves the process through which it took shape. Unexpected events in the process of producing *Building Movements* were just as revealing as the actions of the works themselves. For instance, a person from Godsell’s office tore down notices we had placed by the lifts, as we stood by with one of the building managers. This occurred without any discussion, but presumably was done because they weren’t hung on the specially designed regulation white circles made for signage in the building. Then, the installations positioned in front of the lifts led the elevator company to shut down that elevator – entirely – such that no-one could enter the works until two hours before the closing/opening event. Neither of these acts were of the building per se, but both resonated in different and telling ways with our experiences of it. These events were far more than just obstructive, they were instructive: they allowed us to understand the building as a set of interacting regimes of power that resonated with one another, becoming linked like the choir of a regulatory compliance regime – passionately singing a hymn about maintaining faith in an ordered, divinely regulated world.

8. The Plot Thickens

The *Building Movements* project began to shape a story about the Design Hub as a building that – compositionally, operationally, and pragmatically – embodies an architecture of bureaucracy and objective illusions; with its uncompromising application of (compositional) rules and regulations, and related machinic qualities. Those inhabiting such a regime (like so many of us inside the compliance driven demands of the bureaucratic-university-machine), need to devise inventive ways of negotiating its indifference to difference. One might spend some time imagining how well the Design Hub could become a character in a novel by Franz Kafka. Such a character might be some kind of bureaucrat but not be of the ‘nerdy’ kind – rather, it would be a supremely charismatic

aesthete concerned with the implementation of a very particular vision, from which variation cannot be tolerated, nor can compromises to the exactitude of that vision. This character would always strive to remain unruffled, and display obsessively compulsive habitual refrains. Such behavior would be likely to give rise to a series of struggles to maintain control, with tension in the story arising through the problem of sustaining a stronghold – a hold that is ultimately as fragile as it is enforced. The plot could thicken with the accretion of conflicts, but the choir would keep singing with an apparently transcendent passion in the background. Ayn Rand’s *Fountainhead* character, Howard Roark, seems like another fitting alter ego.

9. Critique

Does this potential story and sense of an architectural character – developed out of our process of engagement through *Building Movements* – constitute a form of critique? Might this form of critique do what I suggested earlier in fostering the aims of a radical pedagogy, such as unsettling inert ideas? What does this imply about the ambiguous relationship between critique and criticism, and the role of the critic? In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari suggested that:

> Criticism is completely useless. It is more important to connect to the virtual movement that is already real even though it is not yet in existence (conformists and bureaucrats are always stopping the movement at this or that point). (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 58)

*Building Movements* didn’t arise from establishing ‘critical distance’, or halting movements by critically putting things in their place. Rather, it operated through entering into, engaging with, and modulating the virtual movements of both a subject (The Design Hub), and the events arising through our engagement. The distance of the critic is here transformed into an unearthing of difference – fleshe out across an ecology of acts, materials, and words. *Building Movements*

might be productively understood to have built its impetus through mounting a minor architectural critique. Erin Manning might refer to this as an ‘immanent critique’: “an act that only knows the conditions of its existence from within its own process, an act that refuses to judge from without” (Manning, forthcoming).

If criticism is ‘completely useless’, this may simply be because (paradoxically) it has become disconnected from the immanence of aesthetic yield:

    aesthetic yield is the qualitative excess of an act lived purely for its own sake, as a value in itself, over and against any function the act might also fulfill. (Massumi 2014: 10)

This sounds, it must be said, to be exactly what Godsell architects appear to have focused on through emphasizing formal composition and de-emphasizing function, or use-value. This is both the power and the vulnerability of the building. It has such a persistence of forcefully measured composition that it can trigger, in my experience at least, moments of sublime transport – or of the truly ‘awesome’. However, as Madeline Gins might say, this potent architectural character simultaneously suffers from the ‘Being-Too-Damned-Sure-of-Oneself Syndrome’ (Gins, in Lambert 2011). It generates aesthetic yield in a way that tries to stay in control: not to be interfered with, inert and holding still with its distinctive, uncompromised clarity. To return to the Whitehead quote at the beginning of this essay, if the Design Hub is radical – which I would suggest it indeed is – it is because it ‘has been radically infected with inert ideas’, or perhaps more precisely, that it has been infected with an idea of architecture as inert.

10. Play

So, one might say that Building Movements came along to lend a critically situated hand, hand-in-hand with the ethos of a radical pedagogy. If Building Movements...
did, in itself, mount a passionate protest against inert (architectural) ideas, then it did so through the ambiguous trajectory of creative production. By playfully and creatively engaging with this architectural character we could get to know it in new ways, enabling us to simultaneously critique and, I think, develop an appreciation for it along the way. If affection developed, this was not despite its vulnerabilities but because – through the intuitive activity of play – we could enter into sympathy with them.

We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it. (Bergson, in Massumi 2007: 40)

Notes

This essay is a development upon an earlier, considerably shorter version: Building Movements (in ten steps), Architectural Design Research Symposium, Smitheram J., Moloney, J & Twose, S (eds), Wellington, New Zealand, 2014. http://www.victoria.ac.nz/fad/research/architectural-research-through-design

Works Cited


