

# ASSESSING CREATIVITY

## SUPPORTING LEARNING IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

**The assessment of creativity is a key pedagogical challenge facing the design disciplines today.**

One of the first problems for those who have to assess works of architecture and design (including industrial, urban, interior and landscape practices) is the lack of a clear and unambiguous definition of creativity. This issue was addressed in the editors' previous book, *Creativity, Design and Education: Theories, Positions and Challenges* (ALTC 2010).

In their new book, Askland, Ostwald and Williams shift the focus towards the process of assessing creativity and the mechanisms that have been developed to ensure the quality of these processes. In the contemporary environment in tertiary education, the expectation that assessment will be repeatable, precise and specific poses a direct provocation to many of the conventional methods used in architecture and design to assess creativity. The present book sets out to address this situation by providing a framework for understanding and supporting the assessment of creativity in the design and architecture disciplines.

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Hedda Haugen Askland • Michael J. Ostwald • Anthony Williams (Eds)

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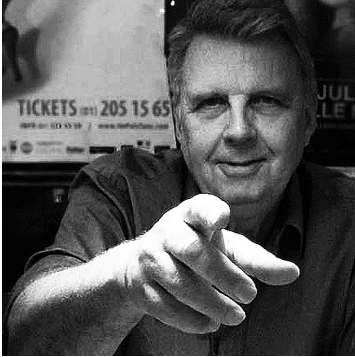
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Crit panel



## Ranulph Glanville

INDEPENDENT ACADEMIC

### When do you (or your discipline group) typically use crit panels for assessment, at what level and what type of work do you assess using crit panels?

I work across all academic levels from first year to doctoral and in many areas of design, including architecture. The crit panel is the standard form of assessment for design work in almost every environment I have worked in; the exception is almost always driven by budget cuts undermining high-quality evaluation of work. Occasionally it is used (sometimes in a modified form) for the assessment of work founded in history, theory and the technical.

### What assessment support tools and/or enablers support the assessment, and how do these support quality assessment?

The most peculiar thing I notice in crit panels is the unanimity of judgement. No matter the background or the position of those reviewing, or the type of criticism they pursue and areas of architecture that interest them, there is a general agreement in the judgement given about the quality of the work presented. I am uncertain as to how or why this is, but in years of taking part in such reviews, I have rarely found, or been in, any disagreement when evaluating the quality of the work presented to the panel.

Given this understanding, it would seem the only tool required is that work is presented and that there is enough time for discussion and the forming of a good judgement. The process of assessment seems to need little else in order to achieve near-unanimity of evaluation while allowing a richness of critical discussion that reflects a wide range of concern.

There are, of course, occasions when this unanimity is not reached, and there are some occasions where the unanimous agreement is badly judged. For these, a process of monitoring can be helpful. The most valuable support tool for this is honesty and humility (the ability to admit that something may have gone wrong). But these tools are requirements for reviewing, anyhow.

**Dr Ranulph Glanville is an independent freelance academic, a professor of one sort or another at the Bartlett, University College London; the Royal College of Art London; Sint Lucas Architectuur Brussels and Gent; RMIT University Melbourne; and The University of Newcastle (NSW). He has a diploma (largely based in his practice in experimental music) from the Architectural Association and PhDs in both cybernetics and human learning. In 2006 he was awarded a DSc in cybernetics and design. He has published close to 350 papers, and is involved in a large-scale publishing project that includes a selection of his papers (in 3 volumes). He teaches around the world and is President of the American Society for Cybernetics. Ranulph lives in Portsmouth, UK.**

**Feedback, in the usual sense, may not be necessary when assessment grows out of a conversation in which feedback, and the exchange of views, is the essence.**

In effect, I am saying that quality is recognisable by peers. I believe this is important, because it does not seem to be specifiable in terms of a list of sub-qualities and the like. Further, if quality were to be defined in terms of sub-qualities, there is an infinite regress: for sub-qualities are just qualities.

### **What feedback do students receive?**

Remark that, in a crit panel, the student is part of the process by which the judgement of his or her work is formed. Feedback, in the usual sense, may not be necessary when assessment grows out of a conversation in which feedback, and the exchange of views, is the essence. In effect, the student's presence and participation gives continuing and cumulative feedback, although this involvement may be reduced by creating formal stages for the crit panel: student presentation; feedback from the panel largely directed at the student and not inviting conversational response; and summary and wind up.

However, the circumstances of the crit panel often mean that the student is nervous and defensive. A written report made by the chair of the crit panel and/or a student colleague is often helpful. Such a report can also help when there is a disagreement between panel members (such disagreements are not necessarily damaging: they reflect the world of design and throw the responsibility for deciding what to believe back to the student).

One other difficulty that a written report can help with is the less well articulated, or carefully hidden negative criticism and negative criticisms presented as hedges rather than statements.

We should remember that crit panels ideally happen in the presence of the student's peers, and they may also provide help and support. Sometimes peers are the best critics.

### **How does crit panel support the students' immediate and long-term learning?**

Crit panels are essentially responsive, dealing with work presented to them. They cannot have a formal strategic role and definitely have no normal role in plotting a long-term path forward. However, since the conversation inevitably contains suggestions for possible actions, an opportunity for panel members to suggest ways forward and for students to ask advice on how to proceed often arises. This can be picked up in the crit panel report.

**To a large extent, the success of a crit panel depends on the responsibility, competence, interest and selflessness of the members of the panel, and their ability to judge when to draw a line.**

Immediate and long-term learning support may be provided in another way: the discussion the panel generates normally opens possibilities, not only in reaction to the student's work, but also because panel members can be so different, and many may deal with ideas and experiences that may surprise and inspire students through their differences and unfamiliarity. Panel members may also bring news of understandings and thinking that is cutting-edge in the field, thus offering new, long-term possibilities.

### **How do crit panels support, encourage or enable creativity?**

First, critics on the panels, unless otherwise directed, will be interested in the quality of the ideas the student is working with: they look for excitement, poetry and creativity, as well as appropriateness and (when relevant) practicality.

Second, bringing ideas from outside, creating analogies, metaphors, contrasts and cognitive confusion, and pointing to precedents can all support and encourage creativity.

On occasion, a bad crit may fail to recognise quality in the work presented, or may just go badly (there is sometimes a positive feedback that works to exaggerate either the good or the bad). In my experience, this does not happen often, but it is always something to be aware of. Ideally, the chair of the panel will control such behaviour.

To a large extent, the success of a crit panel depends on the responsibility, competence, interest and selflessness of the members of the panel, and their ability to judge when to draw a line. For instance, a really tough battle between panel members can be unnerving to a student and may even damage the student's confidence, or inappropriately rubbish a project.

In my first term at architecture school (The Architectural Association in London), I attended some 4th year juries (crit panels), with the legendary Sam Stevens as a participant. I have never forgotten what he remarked about the job of the critic, and I have tried to live by his recipe ever since. The recipe was that a critic has two ways to act: to understand what the student is trying to achieve (his or her aims) and to judge how well he or she has managed; and to question the student's aims.