

Conversations⁷

↳ ON CARE
AS PRACTICE:

A
CONVERSATION
WITH
ELKE
KRASNY

17TH INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE EXHIBITION
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PAVILION OF TURKEY

Architecture¹² as² Measure⁷
Ölçü⁴ Olarak⁶ Mimarlık⁸

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Ian Erickson: The contemporary planetary imagination might be understood as being negotiated by the ideological and material frictions between, what is on the one hand, the necessary practices of planetary care and maintenance, and the other, the myths of innovation and limitless growth. The model of infinite capitalist expansion which has surprisingly mystical origins in the 17th-century group the Hartlib circle,¹ who imagined infinite growth through alchemy, is now bumping up against the limits of the planet itself. As a symptom of this crisis between ideology and the socio-material reality, we see increasingly tone-deaf calls made by both billionaires and aspiring capitalists to go beyond the planetary and “colonize Mars,” for humans to become an “interplanetary species.” Clearly, the entrenched ideology of growth is quite literally outgrowing the planet itself. How do practices of care counter this expansionary ideology and how does giving critical attention to care shift our planetary imagination?

Elke Krasny: Thank you for this really profound and also very complex question. I think your question already presumes an answer. When modernity and the ideology of unbounded extractivism—of human and non-human resources—reach its limits, there is a search beyond them. As the Earth is rendered infertile, we have a crisis of reproduction beyond the human, which requires there to be another territory for exploitation. So, I think one part of your question is how there can be a future if we continue like this while we are actually colonizing our own future as a species.

I think the other part of your question asks about practices of care. Here, I would say it is not just practices of care in their isolated rehearsal that are important, but also how they inform a different type of ideology and new narratives that can offer a possibility for change. In this context, it’s interesting

1 For more on the Hartlib circle, see our conversation with Zeynep Çelik Alexander in this web publication.

to look at the question of maintenance. How can maintaining be both a resistant and transformative practice? What I would like to introduce is this ambivalent notion of maintenance as maintaining ways of resisting for the given types of architecture that are not meant to be there in the future—considered disposable or to be torn down—because they didn’t conform with the criteria of hyper-capitalist acceleration. In that way, we could say practicing maintenance as resistance could be a bottom-up and a rhizomatic way of instituting different ways of existing. But we could also say that maintaining the system can be a very hegemonic practice in that it could be a continuation of all those forces together that have led us into the current predicament. I’m just trying to make maintenance understood in a more complex way that it’s neither liberatory nor entrenched with capitalism, but more about how either of these ways of maintaining the planet could be there.

There are a lot of scholars, thinkers, activists, and architectural practitioners, who start from the premise that our future has been colonized and that we not only have to think in terms of decolonization about the past and the legacies that are inherited but also in terms of relation to growth. Growth is a chrono-political orientation toward what is understood as the planet and how we exist on it. To have different a chrono-political orientation toward the future means seeing it not as a continuation of what we have now but taking its injured and broken state as it is to maintain it for the healing processes in the future.



Index as fictional paperwork. This paperwork lists keywords from the website publication content that is exhibited at the “Diorama of Maintenance and Care,” in NEMESTUDIO’s Four Dioramas installation at the physical space of the Pavilion of Turkey at the 2021 Venice Architecture Biennale. The dioramas in the Pavilion showcase some of the website publication content and fictional paperwork where they all become part of the *mise-en-scènes* of the stories depicted. Graphic design by Paleworks. Courtesy of Pavilion of Turkey.

Melis Ugurlu: I wanted to ask about the different scales that care operates across. In the introduction of your co-edited book *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, you are talking about the centrality of architecture and urbanism in caring for the habitat, and you emphasize that with the term habitat you are referring to all possible scales of inhabitation—from the living room to the region, from the schoolyard to the city, and from the refugee camp to the planet.² How do you see possible effective contributions taking place across the different scales that architecture operates in, and particularly in architecture’s relationship to the planet?

Concerning that, I’d also like us to talk about the term “critical care” itself, which you describe to be both borrowed from the medical term for diagnosing and treating life-threatening conditions of the critically ill and also from Critical Theory, which uses reflective analysis. As you also highlight the importance of our terminologies, I wanted to ask you about the significance of these references in constructing the term. You also talk about going beyond diagnosis and analysis and seeking contribution through your work. What is the diagnosis, and what can architecture contribute towards a treatment?

E.K.: Thank you for another profound question. As an educator, I want to look at this from the angle of education and how the profession is formed through education. Many argue that there is a big gap between studying architecture and practicing it. Yet what architectural education offers is a space, not only for reflection but also for diagnosing the ills of the profession. So what would be interesting to think about is how architectural education could become more oriented toward changing the practice itself instead of accepting the kind of split between what is a university and “the real world.” A term that reminds us of the very toxic colonial legacies of education, is the “ivory tower.” Instead of seeing the university as an ivory tower shielded against realities, we should invite practice into schools to make the reflective and diagnostic capacities of critical education a larger part of working as an architect in the real world. Part of that is understanding that what one learns in architecture can also be to become a political practitioner of architecture instead of a merely economic one.

I want to go back to your question on terminology and different scales. I’m not trained as an architect, but I am very inspired by how architects are trained to work in various scales—not just in a very literal way, but as an approach that allows us to think about how each inhabitation that architects plan for will have effects on the habitat as a whole. Once we start thinking about an apartment building, we understand that it has planetary reverberations: when we take into account how the material used in the construction of this building has been extracted from somewhere, all the labor that is necessary to construct it, and all the potential labor that will be necessary for the next 50 years to maintain it. If this thinking enters architectural education, toxic ways of practicing architecture might have a chance to actually disappear.

In terms of the idea of “critical care,” it’s a term that Angelika Fitz and I introduced or started to use long before the Covid-19 pandemic, so I’m not sure I would use it in quite the same way today. At the time, we borrowed this term from the medical context to speak about the critical condition of the planet, and even though I still think that is something we can do, the very lack of critical care units during the pandemic and how this has massively endangered the chances of survival for people would make me hesitate to use it in such a metaphorical way. The pandemic has brought us closer to what critical care actually is and as something that can no longer be a metaphor; it is filled with so much grief and mourning and so much socio-material and socio-ecological reality.

I would now emphasize instead that “care is critical.” We learned this both from the ecocidal condition of the planetary habitat and species loss, and from the pandemic. What I am really interested in is how at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a feeling that something like global solidarity might actually

² Elke Krasny and Angelika Fitz, *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2019): 13.

be possible; but then big pharma entered into the picture, and so many borders closed—not just nation-state borders but also mental and social borders. So, I’m wondering what the lessons of the pandemic will be and how these will enter the imaginaries of future architects. There are already some suggestions that, at minimum, each home should have a space for quarantine in the future because making infected people stay at home means that family life or kinship will also become infected. World Health Organization, for instance, has stated that this is only one of the many anthropogenic pandemics that will come, so preparedness and provision in architectural terms must become part of care. And not just care while something is happening, but also pre-care for future crises.

I.E.: I’d like to pick up on the discussion of architectural practice and education in part of your response to the previous question and extend that to look at how architecture itself is evaluated. Frameworks of care turn conventional architecture evaluation on its head. Rather than continuing to judge architecture merely by how it looks, evaluating buildings through a lens of care forces us to instead judge architecture by how it performs, a socio-material criteria. What I wonder is how do we measure the performance of that architecture according to its capacity to care?

Measurement, performance, and quantification as they relate to architecture are most found in descriptions of the building itself rather than its effects: the literal dimension strings of building elements or the simulated performance of BIM environments. Measuring the “human factors” related to architecture and its production is often seen as more difficult by comparison. When measurements of human value are attempted, they are most frequently in the context of industrial capitalism’s attempts to mechanize the human body through performance metrics—from the first industrial textile workers to today’s bio-surveilled Amazon warehouse workers. Today, we even eagerly begin to apply these measurements to ourselves in the name of care. As discussed by other scholars, the increasingly popular technological phenomenon of self-tracking wellness solutions puts the onus of care on the individual and reduces human life to metrics of counted steps, heart rates, weight, etc., which conflate self-care and self-optimization in order to prepare individuals for more labor productivity.³ Given all of this, what are the techniques and frameworks to measure the architectural performance of care, and then what are their attendant value systems?

E.K.: Evaluation-centricity you have described, and how bodies are constantly measured against themselves, turn the environments to ecosystem services to be measured. Although certain things cannot be captured through these measurements, I do think that there are things that you can measure that are useful. For instance, how are differently-abled bodies being supported by architecture, how can they get from here to there, and how do building materials and infrastructural units within buildings not make bodies sick because there’s too much lead? We can look at material ecologies and how they actually care for people. I think these dimensions of care that have to do with the relationship between bodies and materials could be measured productively. One of the things I find really interesting is the long-term considerations: do you look at the building 10 or 20 years after it’s been built, and how it has supported people to live in dignified conditions? What I appreciate in your question is that the life of a building begins not just after construction but with inhabitation. We want to understand as researchers and architectural practitioners— but also as policymakers, investors, and developers—what these buildings do and how they provide for bodies and their care. I think the big danger is—as it is with all these other evaluation-centric measures—in that we might end up with whole new types of care washing as we are already experiencing with greenwashing. How do

3 For more on this point, see Hi’ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese in “Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times,” *Social Text* 38 (2020): 1–16.

we resist this commodification? And maybe one of the ways is to come up with new ways of evaluating collectively.

M.U.: I wanted to touch upon the subject of interdependency and how we understand that. In repairing our broken planet, it is crucial to step away from individuality and focus on interconnectedness, as you highlight in the *Critical Care* book, particularly between economy, ecology, and labor, as well as interdependency between humans and non-humans. We rely on collaborations, coalitions, and solidarity through interdisciplinary ways of working and creating alliances between diverse knowledge and agents. In our curatorial project for the Pavilion of Turkey, we position architecture as a measure for assessing our place on Earth and our role concerning those with whom we live together, as a species alongside more-than-human-others and as architects with actors of other disciplines and domains of work, including builders, lawyers, anthropologists, environmental historians, and construction workers, etc. Could you talk about the importance of these frameworks and interdependencies for architecture?

E.K.: I think that modern architecture is very much linked to individuality and to what in contemporary times has become hyper-individualism. On the one hand, this plays out with what we call “signature architecture,” which highlights and recognizes the work of a singular individual that has led architecture to become capitalized and prevented interdependence from entering the making of architecture. The other long-term effect of this individualization is thinking of architecture as a real estate unit, through which one can make money—the individual investment in architecture as a source for financial return. In modern times this has been done through the logic of rent and the parcellation of land into units, then in the 21st century, architecture became a means of financialization, which was a big jump in making architecture independent from lived realities. So individualism and signature style left behind planetary concerns altogether in pursuit of becoming useful for financialized and hyper-accelerated capitalism. Re-introducing interdependence is the only way to understand how the built environment is in deep connection with all kinds of bodies, human and non-human.

I.E.: I am interested in talking about the relationship between the state and care that you began to allude to a little bit earlier when discussing the pandemic. I’m curious about the simultaneous decline of collective practices of care and the decline of collective mechanisms of democracy, both of which have been eroded by individualist regimes of neoliberalism. Through neoliberal austerity measures, the ability of the state to care for its public has been greatly diminished, while many governments have followed neoliberal financial principles by opening up the democratic process to forces of capital, which have obliterated true democratic representation. The relationship between care and the state has been recently exacerbated, as you mentioned earlier in our conversation and in your short essay “Radicalizing Care,” writing that “the Covid-19 crisis has thrown into sharp relief our dependence upon the governing bodies that govern our bodies.”⁴ Given the mutually correlated decline between care and democracy, I’m curious whether the reverse relationship is also true. Do increased practices of care strengthen the democratic nation-state and other collective forms of government? Essentially, what is the relationship between care and collective governance, and what architectures support or dismantle these practices and institutions?

E.K.: Not all forms of state care are the kinds of state care that we would want, of course. Think, for instance, the residential schools in Canada or

4 Elke Krasny, “Radical Care,” *Site Magazine* (2020), <https://www.thesitemagazine.com/elke-krasny>.

people who are held in mental institutions against their will, or bodies that were sterilized in the past because they were not considered suitable to reproduce. Each country around the globe has similar stories in different ways. So, thinking through the lens of how the state has taken care of the bodies of its citizens, and specifically on the questions around health and education—which historically have been in the realm of the so-called common good or welfare—we can really understand the governing ideologies of the states at different times and how they relate to their population. We would learn, for instance, a lot about toxicity and state violence and forms of caretaking that were not benevolent but were argued to be for the greater good. Care, very often, has to do with rendering people dependent, which means that the state can have authority over them and make decisions in their name for them, which has a complex history. On the other hand, the neoliberal promise of freeing care from the authoritarian state has actually put the entire responsibility on the individual subject to be responsible for their own care and caretaking of their bodies—not just so that they are healthy and can enjoy a decent life but so that they can become more productive individuals who can consume, produce and perform within this very evaluation-centric matrix.

I want to go back to what you asked at the very beginning, of how a shared planetary imaginary is rooted in the question of how care has to do with ecological and social justice. We need to consider the violent legacies of the past and the inequalities of the present in order to make care a mechanism of redistribution where access to the care is not a neoliberal market choice. In the context of the pandemic, care is only as good as the worst kind of care, something the ones with the least resources have access to. And I think this is where I would look at architecture because it builds the infrastructures through which housing, education, and health care can be provided for.

M.U.: As we are reaching towards the end of our conversation, perhaps it is important to talk about how the discipline of architecture needs to look back at itself in terms of architectural labor, and specifically, how we work in architecture in the context of care ethics and how our conditions of care are applied and neglected within the production of architecture—this spans from working hours and conditions to divisions of labor to gendered pay disparities to exploitation and even to who gives and receives care.

In relationship to that, there's also a big gap between productive and reproductive labor in terms of the value they receive, where the former has historically been viewed as the only existing and legitimate form of work. This separation further extends with the gendered division of labor: reproductive and care work is feminized, defined as women's roles in society, and largely unrecognized, undervalued, and rendered invisible under capitalist systems. Could you comment on the ethics and politics behind care and its labor within the discipline of architecture?

E.K.: I think there are a lot of initiatives these days, from the global moratorium on construction to Who Builds Your Architecture? that are looking at the inequalities in the profession itself. I think the gender dimension of it is really interesting when we think about how maintenance and daily reproduction is very much gendered female. The scholar Françoise Vergès has written critically and beautifully about how millions of migrant women open the city every day and how black and brown bodies travel for hours in order for these offices and gyms and many other spaces to be clean for all these bodies who then enter for work or for their physical reproduction.⁵

On the other hand, we could say that the construction site is very much gendered male; millions of bodies identified as male work in the globalized construction industry under extremely bad conditions. So, both the construction, the beginning of the physical existence of the building, and also its maintenance,

5 See Françoise Vergès, "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender," *e-flux 100* (May 2019). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender>

are very uncared and you could say this goes far beyond the profession: does the architect only design and not responsible for neither the construction conditions, nor the maintenance? I wonder what kind of politics and collective action on the part of the architectural profession is needed for extending care to these sites of construction and maintenance and making them part of the professional concern.

In fact, before we end, I would like to ask you something because you had this important question about evaluation earlier in our conversation. And I was wondering what your own approach to that is, in your curatorial project for the Pavilion of Turkey, and what would you put forward as a way of evaluating architecture differently?

M.U.: Something that is quite central for us is looking at the inner workings of architecture itself, and especially things that seem to be the mundane, every day, and even banal, things that are normalized and therefore paid less attention to—but construct our world as well as our planetary imagination. These inner workings are norms and procedures of construction, material extraction, supply chains, or the maintenance for buildings. Sometimes it is a typical architecture contract that we take a closer look at to investigate working hours and conditions, or a document that quantifies human labor within the construction industry.⁶ We find that paperwork, bureaucracy, and regulation of architecture are especially interesting areas to do this research. So, through the lens of measure, we take a closer and more critical look at the existing documents, standards, codes, and realities of architecture to offer an alternative reading, evaluation, and eventually imagination about what constitutes the idea of “environment.”

E.K.: I find taking the contractual as a way to question the labor conditions extremely interesting. The question of how the lived realities for people are being evaluated is about how are they being cared for by a building when they live in it instead of seeing it our source to be exploited for an increased value. I think what you describe is wonderful for looking at the processes of intellectual production and for labor conditions. And I think it would be extremely interesting to think about what the measure is in that sense. What makes a good office space, what makes a good space of living, what makes a good space of elderly care without this immediately becoming added value or exploitable in the name of capitalism. Perhaps we may get a chance to talk again in the future and think about different measures of care, I think that would be really interesting.

6 See “Another Contract” (Paperwork-22) and “The Measurable Human Value,” (Paperwork-1) by the Curatorial Team in this web publication.

About the author

Elke Krasny is a Professor for Art and Education and Head of the Department of Education in the Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Krasny's scholarship and curatorial work address questions of care at the present historical conjuncture with a focus on emancipatory and transformative practices in art, curating, architecture and urbanism.