Towards Methods for Criticism of the Urban Environment

by Jorma Mänty

Environmental criticism, particularly the criticism of the built environment, has been mostly emotional and narrow-scoped. Architectural and planning competitions have been said to involve genuine criticism in the procedure of judging and ranking the entries. However, systematic and logically grounded principles are not easily found in the final documents of the competitions. Possible lines for developing methods of criticism are sketched here, although one has to admit that "the spirits of the ages" tend to stamp their marks on the practice of criticism.

O NE COULD ARGUE, with some grounds, that it is futile to discuss methods of criticism concerning the environment because we live in the age of postmodernism. This age of postmodernism is said to allow all possible kinds of criticism, and "anything goes" for methods. Methods, as well as expert opinions, can compete and conflict and thus dissolve in the general and amorphic discourse. However, the "postmodern condition" (Lyotard) offers the opportunity to discuss, for example, the issue of

THE MEANING OF CONCEPTIONS:
1. INFORMATIONAL
2. SYMBOLIC
3. "OBTUSE" = BLUNT = DULL-EDGED
(Roland Barthes)

criticism fairly freely, without the need to coin sharp-edged definitions of concepts used. Roland Barthes has given a name to the meaning of not-too-well defined conceptions: "the obtuse meaning", – the "blunt" or "dull-edged" meaning. This is the "third meaning" of any conception, the other two being "informational" and "symbolic". (Barthes, p. 56 ff.) – I could well retitle my presentation accordingly: "Ways of Criticism".

1.

When we discuss built environments which have been there, say, one hundred years, or one thousand years, we do not call it criticism. Normally, this kind of approach is said to be history or, rather, historiography. However, "even history needs to create a code of values to give sense to the past" (Tafuri, p. 175). And Michel Foucault has taken the trouble to show that what we call history is nothing but a set of stories or narratives concerning past things. Historiographers, of course, take pains to be as "objective" as possible in collecting "facts", but their accounts are just narratives expressed in more or less arbitrarily chosen frameworks, to the effect that the subject-matter that we call History is nothing but a Hi-Story.

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>
> (Manfredo Tafuri)
>
> HISTORY = NARRATIVES —> HI-STORY
> (Michel Foucault)

But historiography does not only use words. Any book of the History of Architecture presents a collection of pictures or photographs to emphasize the point or just to make the point. Pictures are thought to be less corruptible than text, which can be written in eloquent rhetorics. But Roland Barthes, for one, has been able to show that pictures can be, and are used, as rhetorically as words. "One picture is worth a thousand words", as the famous Life-magazine once advertised itself. A picture, a photograph in particular, can be authentic, but it is authentic in quite a narrow sense. If we look at a photograph taken of a building or a piece of the built environment built in the Roman era, we look at it just as something preserved from the past, and we do not even think, in the first place, that it may have been a result of an activity as greedy as the activity of the developers of today. It can be added that the modern computer processing of photographs really creates illusions of authenticity.

I will return to the *reading* of architecture and urban environment below, but to show that historiography is very firmly connected with its context e. g. in time, I will quote a parallel by the famous writer Jorge Luis Borges: "One literature differs from another, prior or posterior, less because of the text than because of the way in which it is read: if I were granted the possibility of reading any presentday page – this one for example – as it will be read in the year two thousand, I would know what the literature of the year two thousand will be like" (Borges, p. 249).

This means that things from the past, e. g. built environments, are not things as they are. They are things in their own context, but they are also things in our context. In a certain way, then, the past can be "planned".

2.

When we discuss new developments or a built environment erected during one or two last decades, we practice criticism in the popular sense. This criticism involves emotions of all kinds. Finnish attitudes has been strikingly described by Riitta Nikula, Director of Research at the Finnish Museum of Architecture, when she wrote in the preface of a recent publication: "Finnish architectural discussion is characterized by pointed opinions, muddled concepts, and strong emotions" (Modernismi..., p. 6).

The cover page of a Finnish monthly magazine exclaims: "Down With Ugly Buildings" (*HS, Kuukausiliite*). And the opening page of the article to which the cover refers, presents a whole-page picture of the "ugliest building in Helsinki". In some 20 pages the editor of the article devotedly enumerates and criticises the "ugly" buildings of Helsinki, carefully mentioning the names of the designers. Also, there are pictures and careful descriptions of old and "beautiful" buildings which had been torn down and replaced by those "ugly" ones. The "ugly" buildings had all been built during the last 15–20 years.

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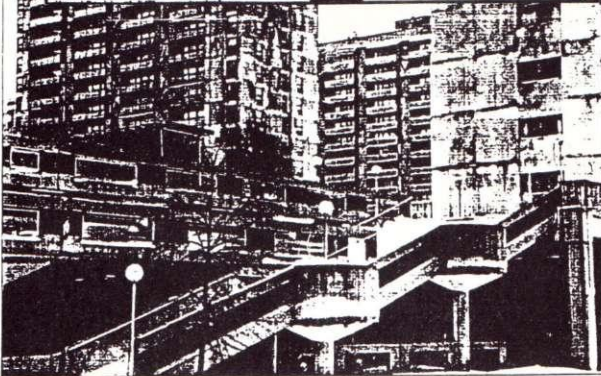>
> (Riitta Nikula)

Popular Architectural criticism in Finland: "Down With Ugly Buildings". "The Ugliest Building in Helsinki". "A Monumental Blunder". (*Helsingin Sanomat*, Monthly Supplement, 4/92.)

The biggest newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published in 1990 a whole-page article with heavy criticism of Hervanta, the so-called Satellite or Daughter Town of Tampere. The headline says: "The Terrible Hervanta" (*HS*).

The "ugly" buildings of Helsinki and the "terrible" area of Tampere were, to some extent, criticised a little after they had become reality, but this recent kind of massive hammering has not been seen previously. However, the criticism is very one-dimensional. It does not consider the contexts, in which those pieces of environment were created, in which they were given the prerequisities of existence. The criticism does not refer to any totality, within which they were made possible. All the blame had been laid on the architects, or – in the case of Hervanta – on the lack of skill among the municipal planning officers. But one can infer that the general cause of the whole disaster is seen to be an abstract idea called modernism or functionalism.

Kolme kerrostaloa ja tuhat ikkunaa Tampereen sateillitnkaupungissa. Markku Bärman

Hervannan hirveä kohtalo

Sivu C 5

Popular Built Environment Criticism in Finland: "The Dreadful Fate of Hervanta". "The Awful Hervanta". (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 11th March, 1990.)

Helsingin Sanomat, sunnuntaina 11 maaliskuuta 1990   C 5

SUNNUNTAI

HIRVEÄ HERVANTA

Tampereen tytärkaupungista järjestetyn suuren suunnittelukilpailun voittaja Aarno Ruusuvuori sanoo nyt:
"Mitään ei jäänyt jäljelle alkuperäisestä."

The situation of today has not been unanticipated. It was Marshall McLuhan who wrote already in the early sixties that "each new technology creates an environment that is itself regarded as corrupt and degrading. Yet the new one turns its predecessor into an art form" (McLuhan, p. ix). And, in the mid-sixties, Christopher Alexander, in his famous essay, "The City Is Not a Tree", wrote: "The ... public ... regards the onset of modern buildings and modern cities everywhere as an inevitable, rather sad piece of the larger fact that the world is going to the dogs" (p. 401).

So, I would like to argue that it would be wise to regard any popular or vulgar black-and-white criticism – something bad, something good; something ugly, something beautiful – as highly suspect. It may obstruct our view of seeing problems of more general nature.

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>
> (Christopher Alexander 1966)

3.

Frequently, we also consider future or 'possible' environments, that is, plans and designs of the environments in question, presented in drawings and other kinds of descriptions. Plans and designs have to acquire enough authority to 'take place' in reality. They have to convince the people who sit on the money, and they have to convince the people who are given the power to decide upon them. The normal way of putting this is to say that the plans should bear the marks of realism.

There is one particular type of plans or designs, which are said to go through a definite and thorough procedure of criticism: architectural and planning competitions. This type is best known among architects and with fervour advocated by architectural associations. I will not use space to describe the main features of the system(s) of architectural competitions. It would suffice to state that in each competition the entries are judged by a jury formed of people from all involved and interested parties. But it would be worthwhile to ask, whether the criticism practiced in competitions is of a genuine nature? (I use deliberately the word 'genuine', and leave it,

also deliberately, undefined.) My first – tentative – answer is that it is a special kind on criticism, closely tied with the particular competition at issue. I have not made thorough analyses of the minutes of variuous competitions, but, having read quite a number of Finnish competition documents, I am willing to argue that no coherent general principles of criticism can be found. What has been common, however, is a set of frequently repeated words which show certain affinity to a hidden or veiled or imaginary "fraternity"; and thus those repeated words have an air of liturgy. For example, every competition programme states, within its opening passage, that a "high-level solution" is looked for. This could be a subtle message to possible participants that low-level lay-designers, don't bother, or, it could be a piece of advance information about that the jury is not regarding as self-evident the search for best solutions.

The jury of a competition has to achieve a *judgement*, they have to *decide* upon the ranking of the entries. This is more important than the criticism. In most cases a concencus among the jury members is seen as worth striving for. There may have been 'genuine' criticism practiced during the assessment period of a competition jury, but it very seldom is apparent in the final documents.

All the mentioned kinds are normative in character. They make definite distinctions between what is and what is not to be favoured.

Non-normative kinds of criticism (which, perhaps, could also be called positive) are explanative and interpretative in their nature. I do not elaborate on them here, but I only mention that they are meant to be cool and neutral vehicles of just seeing and describing phenomena from their own points of view.
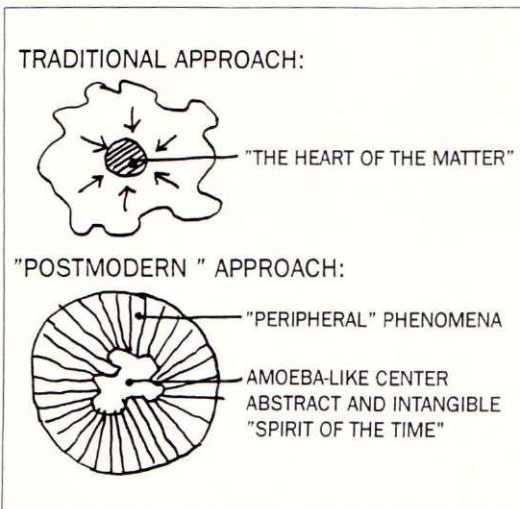
5.

To try to get some more pragmatic meaning to my approach, I would like to suggest a general question to be asked when considering a critical inquiry concerning urban (or rural) environments: What is the rationality *of* this or that environment? What is the rationality *in* it? Or the rationality *behind* it? What rationality *could be applied* to it?

These questions may sound odd, particularly at the present time, when there seems to be a demand of all kinds of irrational features, oddities and whimsical details in our physical environment. Despite this popular – and also populist – view, some kind of rationalism is always involved, although it may not be apparent. My general question could be expressed also in a slightly transformed plural form: "What rationalities are involved?" For example, the rationality of government and social control affects the environment at least as much as affect the needs of the users. As an analogy I could refer to the situation in the Finnish universities. Formerly the academic world was uniform in the sense that the prevailing rationality was characteristically academic, that is, based on education, teaching and research. Later on, a new rationality was added: that of administration. These two rationalities clashed, and the latter one has "won", in a way, as could be inferred from the constant use of terms like 'efficiency', 'manageability', and 'competence'.

Any city, or any fragment of an urban environment, can be regarded as a kind of *montage* or *collage*, not only in the physical sense, but

4.

What I have discussed above, could be put under a common title of 'conventional criticism'. It simply means a criticism which is done without recognizing its grounds, that is, just expressing the good/bad and ugly/beautiful distinctions. When condemning some functionalist buildings or urban fragments as ugly, the critic does not think that he/she pronounces opinions at the time of some rising postmodernism. It goes without saying that most of the 'normal' criticism published in newspapers or professional periodicals is of this sort. And so is the judging of competition entries, if there is any eagerness to call it genuine criticism.

But beside the conventional criticism, other kinds could be named. I make it brief, trying to avoid highly sophisticated terms.

'Strategic criticism' attempts to see its objects in a certain prospect. For example, one could consider a town plan from the ecological point of view, and apply some kind of a general 'survival strategy' criteria. Or, a still more general 'humanistic strategy', with its more or less explicitly expressed principles, could be taken as background.

The task of some 'operative criticism', in turn, is to try to change prevailing conventions or public opinions. This kind of criticism is exercised by coining and publishing manifestoes. In the field of planning and architecture there are quite many examples of them, from Ruskins *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, through Le Corbusier's *Charter of Athens* to Asplund's *acceptera*.

also in all its more or less abstract contexts. There is government, there is control, there are norms, there is civic action, there is technological progress and information revolution, there are theories of urban structure, etc., etc. All these levels and points of view dovetail. Therefore it becomes more and more difficult to find – and to look for – "the point". And I think that it is useful – at least for the time being – not to attempt to reach for any "heart of the matter", any "true essence", any "kernel" of the issue, because the kernel seems to be of very abstract and shifting nature. That is why it could be called, for example, "Zeitgeist" or similar. Thus one is not urged to approach the "center" of the issue, but one is adviced and encouraged to shift the focus and to consider some "peripheral" phenomena as important and worthy of studying. – This would mean something that have been attributed to postmodernism.

What are, or what could be, regarded as peripheral issues to be taken into consideration? The "spirit of the time" says that "anything goes". This is not a bad advice, but the common sense says that some kind of relevance should be established. Recent literature in some fields, closely or loosely related to urban research and planning, offer some interesting themes. A couple of them deserve to be mentioned here.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH:

"THE HEART OF THE MATTER"

"POSTMODERN" APPROACH:

"PERIPHERAL" PHENOMENA

AMOEBA-LIKE CENTER
ABSTRACT AND INTANGIBLE
"SPIRIT OF THE TIME"

The "postmodern" shift in analysis, research, and criticism. (Author's drawing.)

SEMIOTIC APPROACH:
ENVIRONMENT AS MESSAGE

"THE OBJECT CANNOT BE CONSIDERED A THING, BUT THE VERY (OPEN) SYSTEM OF ENDLESS MESSAGES."
(Manfredo Tafuri)

DISCOURSE APPROACH:
ACTORS AND FACTORS
AFFECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Semiotic approach has been known quite a while. Elements and components of the urban environment can be interpreted as *signs* in various systems of signification. Architects and planners know well the work of Kevin Lynch who, in his book *The Image of the City*, made an early approach of this kind. One of the main lines of semiotic is to see the environment as language.

The language analogy has repeatedly been applied to environment and architecture. But Kaj Nyman, in his recent dissertation, maintains that the question is not about analogy; the buildings *constitute* a language (Nyman, passim). The buildings themselves do not "speak" to us, but we "read" them. The built environment is read as "narrative" or as a sequence of several narratives. And the environment thus conveys "messages". Manfredo Tafuri has stated it in this way: "... the artistic *object* cannot be considered a *thing*, but rather, a message *in fieri* or, if you prefer, the very (open) system of endless messages..." (Tafuri, p. 178).

It should be kept in mind that environmental narratives are not definite and not in some pre-arranged *one* order. They are not *linear* in the way one reads a literary text. There is no particular beginning and no particular end in an environmental narrative.

How mystical or heretic it may sound, this kind of approach would offer some way of looking for – if not finding – the rationalities

involved in the built environment. The built environment is "written" or "pronounced" in some *codified* way. And it may be of vital importance to reveal the code or layered codes. There can be codes of different levels of generality. This kind of criticism could, then, be profitable to planners as well as to citizens. Some parties involved in the process of the environmental formation may feel uncomfortable when their codes are taken into daylight, but the sum total, I firmly believe, would be profitable anyway.

Discourse approach takes the *context* as its field of study. It attempts to throw light broadly on the actors and factors that affect the built environment. The main idea is that sharp distinctions are to be avoided. For a discourse analyst there are no issues which would form a specific category of matters pertaining to urban environment. Government, control, advertising, journalism, public opinion, planners' attitudes, ideologies, mandatory or voluntary norms, traffic regulations, social behaviour, etc., etc. – This approach may well prove to be a very rewarding one, because it may reveal, along with the semiotic approach, many relations which have remained (or have been kept) hidden.

One third approach could be that of **deconstruction**. It seems to be on its way to become popular among architects in their design practice, because of some few published examples, like the Parc de la Villette area in Paris. This approach simply means the attempt of sorting out the (hidden or apparent) structure of the environment and then to convert or transform it – in an analysis or in practice.

Well, I do not know how well and how much I have offered grounds or background for the possible practice of environmental criticism. However, I am interested in the roughly sketched themes myself, and I am convinced that they prove fruitful.

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