



"My home", Manne Lodmark.

Observations on Architectural Criticism

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Architecture holds a place of honour nowadays. The cities – great projects obligent – do their best to endow themselves with outstanding works which will contribute, in an increasingly competitive search for distinction, to the establishment of a reputation. The SALON INTERNATIONALE DE L'ARCHITECTURE held in Paris in the Fall of 89 was symptomatic of such a phenomenon. The great metropolitan areas have become rivals through the realizations of prestigious sponsors who are expected to have an impact on the dynamism and the fame of the city. Architecture has also provided a field of competition for European and other cosmopolitan oriented cities. As an illustration of the above, we have Roger's project for the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Perrault's project for the Très Grande Bibliothèque in Paris, or still Gregotti's project for the Belem communications centre in Lisbon. In addition, public institutions are trying to promote architecture among the public at large. The Institut Français d'Architecture, the first place to be devoted to the display of contemporary architecture, was soon imi-

tated by the Pavillon de l'Arsenal in Paris, Arc en Rêve in Bordeaux, etc.

Architecture has now become an object of the media. Passing through media, with its consequent production and consumption of messages, raises the problem of the understanding of architecture through words and commentaries, instead of spaces lived in directly. And it so happens that the task of giving verbal expression to the architectural work has fallen on criticism. However, criticism cannot be thought of as a single homogeneous entity as might be done for other types of commentaries. Similarly to every discourse that is characterized by a speaker and a listener, a time and a place, criticism is characterized by the status of the critic, the public whom he is addressing, the institutional setting, and the time at which the statement is made. This means that criticism is always contextual and that there is a diversity of critical discourse. Though every critic addresses himself to an audience, and to the extent that every one partakes in experiencing architecture, architectural criti-

cism has difficulty in determining its own audience. That is what partly differentiates architecture from the other arts. For anyone can go to a concert or visit an exhibit, as long as they express the wish and pay the entrance fee. On the other hand, no one can avoid the experience of built space; everyone has an individual experience with architecture and consequently the very notion of a public vanishes therein.

The different genres of criticism

We can nevertheless distinguish several families of criticism depending on the institutional place that disseminates the statement and on the target audience, however incompletely the latter may be determined.

Journalistic criticism

This is a criticism intended for the general public which is primarily handled by journalists. Its main function is informative, as a means of presenting architecture. The basic ingredients of this criticism consist of situating buildings within an architect's production, as well as within the different existing currents and trends; singling out similarities and differences; and in this manner drawing up for the reader a panorama of architectural trends.

Seasoned skilfully, the above ingredients produce flavourful results. Thus Frédéric Edelmann, while searching within heterogeneous works for a trend that may not have been in the minds of the creators, attempts to define for his readers in *Le Monde* the Mediterranean style, using the Seville Pavilion as an illustration: "Cold yet elegant, compact yet practical, arrogant yet generously carefree"¹.

Along the same line of thought, François Chaslin tries to convey – over apparent oppositions – the prevailing atmosphere and a common sensitivity that characterizes contemporary production:

They (Christian de Portzamparc and Jean Nouvel) partake the same culture, however, the one between text and context, a culture with its concerned generations, aware of the world, and with a headful of ideas and a mix of yesterday's memories and thoughts for the future.²

Another side of journalistic criticism aims at re-situating architectural productions within their socio-political context. This involves tracing back through the institutional history of a project find its political and economic stakes. In this regard, one might remember how François Chaslin explains with respect to the Gare d'Orsay that the "Republic got its money's worth"³.

We might note that this type of criticism can allow itself at times to be seduced by the spectacular side of architecture, that it can be reduced to suggestions to go and see, drawing up a mundane overview of trends, or even establishing a catalogue of who's who among architects. Another obstacle that this criticism does not always manage to avoid is that of replacing the task of analysis with the support of a doctrinal trend, an approach which attributes ideological authority to the latter.

Professional Criticism

Written by professionals and published by magazines addressing themselves primarily to architects, professional criticism seeks to disseminate contemporary architecture or, at least, to analyse it. These publications provide a forum for critics as well as for practitioners through interviews and exchanges. Being published constitutes a form of recognition to a practitioner. As a result of this, professional criticism tends to enhance and even to exaggerate what architects have to say. The paraphrasing of doctrinal statements establishes the degree zero of a professional criticism insofar as it establishes no distance with respect to the object commented on. Yet we know that the connection established between the built and the commentary on it by the author is not always self-evident. That is the reason why certain critics choose as their task to confront the intentions, and the personal values of the architects as well as their built realizations. They can even attempt to establish, over and beyond the particularly singular examples of works, a coherence that may lie behind an approach that is not obvious at first. In such a case, criticism will trace the constant and intermittent features of an individual itinerary. Thus, the varied portraits of artists as "impassioned discoverer", "artisan of the future", "distinguished perfectionist"...

At another level there is professional criticism that

is more independent vis-à-vis the practice of architecture and that thus has an attitude distant enough so as to encourage reflection. Three main directions become available then to professional criticism: – the thematic, which consists of singling out a theme that allows a confrontation or comparison of different realizations with a view to instigate a debate within the profession. These themes can vary: “the taste for engineering”, “light and glass”, “the architecture of movement”... – the analytic, where a selected built example chosen is described so as to retrace the constructive and aesthetic options of the work. This criticism is characterized by the precision of its vocabulary – often technical – and by a plethora of quantitative elements. Details of the specific project are consciously established: programme, constraints of different types, regulations, costs, etc. One needs only to think of the articles in the magazine *Technique et Architecture*. In such a case, criticism provides the elements supposedly helpful for evaluation and judgement; – the historical, where the object discussed is associated with a school in the context of a given history of architecture that brings to the fore a world of relevances. In this case we come close to the boundaries which exist with another family of critics that we shall call specialized criticism.

Specialized criticism

Specialized criticism sees itself as a discipline in its own right with its consequent conceptual system and, occasionally, methods. Its main vehicle (for communication) consists of reputable journals (*L'Histoire de l'Art*, *Les Cahiers de Philosophie*, *Esprit*...), – through which it addresses intellectuals. The boundaries between criticism and discipline are often indistinct. In an article on the links between criticism and history, W. Szambien⁴ notes a reciprocal influence between the two. Too often history is evoked as a means of giving authority to a critical point of view and there are even cases in which where the historical ends up taking the place of the critical content. As for the historians of architecture, there are instances of their biased doctrinal positions:

There are critics who publish material camouflaged as textbook presentations and historians who complacently advance peremptory hypotheses.⁵

W. Szambien traces a general history of criticism and characterizes contemporary criticism by its lack of a clear position on issues, pointing out that such criticism prefers to merely describe the existing points of view. He deplores the absence of objective criteria while also noting that outdated historical criteria are being perpetuated

What has happened to the new objective criteria? The quantifiable is taking over with respect to figures and dates economy and history, in a muddled manner.⁶

Szambien calls on critics to assume their critical judgement and on historians to respect the imperatives of their own discipline instead of allowing themselves to be enticed by journalism. He suggests that the absence of objective criteria in architecture is due to the absence of a shared system of aesthetics. But is there not a danger that a given aesthetic becomes an ideology of taste once such a system is attributed the role of defining criteria? Furthermore, by shifting the problem from the field of history to that of philosophy, doesn't Szambien expose criticism to a contamination such as the one he deplores having in his own area? And in any case, since architecture gives expression to numerous viewpoints – from usage to the aesthetic, from that of history to that of technique – and since a particular discipline will of necessity be partial, a specialized criticism cannot be expected to become a substitute for architectural criticism which has an obligation to take into account all facets of the discipline.

True, the question of objective criteria raised by Szambien is a crucial question for architecture. It represents perhaps the fundamental problem for that kind of criticism which constitutes for us the last group and which P. Collins had already identified: profane criticism.⁷

Profane criticism

We call profane all those non-professional actors who participate in the building process: clients, sponsors, or users. Their view determines the direction that a project can take, as shown so well by P. Collins and their impact on the jury selection process for competitions or even on official declarations of public interest for

grand projects is considerable. The principal question for this category of criticism concerns the criteria for apprehending architecture, criteria which are quite vague and which vary from one case to another.

Critical method and doctrines

American architectural criticism attempted to define and endow itself with a method based on explicit criteria. Thus, according to Alan Colquhoun,

criticism occupies a no-man's-land between enthusiasm and doubt, between poetic sympathy and analysis. With a few rare exceptions, its purpose is not to praise or condemn and it can never capture the essence of the work it is analysing. The critic must try and go beyond the apparent originality of the work and reveal its ideological environment without transforming it into a simple tautology⁸.

Such criticism seeks to restore meaning to works and to re-situate them within a culture⁹; but, in the long run, it remains attached to those doctrines most in the public eye, while examining prevailing precepts. One consequence of this is that it orients production, thereby betraying its concern for operational effectiveness.¹⁰ In fact such criticism gives rise to doctrines, as is so eloquently demonstrated by Gavin Macrae-Gibson's work.¹¹ After analysing the ideological foundations of the modernist movement and identifying, with subtlety, the key notions of this doctrinal structure – memory, expression, morality – , G. Macrae-Gibson expresses the intention to construct, under the heading of "Lyrical Modernism", a mythology for contemporary architecture. Paradoxically, Macrae-Gibson again takes up the very notions of the modernist movement and by redefining them, concludes with an affirmation of continuity as opposed to a conceivable historical rupture. He constructs his "new mythology" and defines the new values of architectural modernism thus:

Our contemporary modernism is no longer seeking to find in form, the abstraction of essence, but rather the representation of the culture. It does not extract the essence of a form from a place but from the urban discourse which is so specific to the architecture and which

emanates from the secret life of the edifices.¹²

However skilful and seductive Macrae-Gibson's construction may be, it remains, nevertheless, singular, i. e. attached specifically to one category of buildings: those of the new modern architecture. In other words, revealing the secret life of buildings, the underlying values of a work may define an area for potential dialogue. But could one imagine a literary criticism that could speak only of the new novel? What is the impact of categories which are too directly linked to personal approaches? They may define a doctrinal paradigm and therefore constitute a necessary reference for designers. But would that mean that criticism would be condemned to ignore atypical manifestations that cannot be classified under any of the recognizable paradigms? Or else, would one have to construct as many mythologies as there are types of approaches? The claim for objectivity in criticism confusedly indicates the difficulty involved in producing a knowledge of architecture on the basis of particular points of view.

Theory and criticism

It is at this level that the need for theory, i. e. for a tool of knowledge allowing for establishment of facts, becomes obvious.

We know that literary criticism works to produce a theoretical tool. Formalist and then Structuralist research was devoted to building a conceptual instrument that would permit the clarification of the construction of a text. The task of formal description consists of unveiling the structure and internal coherence of a text while overlooking its meaning. Barthes' writings on criticism are illustrative of the efforts undertaken by literary criticism to identify the facts per se of literature. The task of criticism is "not to decipher the meaning of the work under study, but to reconstitute the rules and constraints involved in the elaboration of that meaning." "The critic is not expected to reconstitute the work's message, only its system." "The task of criticism" is "purely formal".¹³

Of course the task of literary criticism cannot be limited to a theoretical work on formal description, and T. Todorov has shown not only that reducing it to that task alone was indicative of a romantic ideology but

also that excluding the question of meaning was not possible for literary criticism, as it partakes fully of the values of a society. Todorov proposes that literary criticism work jointly from two perspectives, the one theoretical – concerning facts – and the other critical – concerning values. For him, criticism cannot fail to become interested in the literary form, but it must however discuss also the values which found a text as well as those which it generates. Literature “is a formal play of elements and at the same time an ideological event”.¹⁴

To the extent that literary criticism finds support both in theoretical analysis and at the same time in a study of values, could architectural criticism not benefit from theoretical studies focused on architecture? Too often, specialized criticism takes into account only the finished project only while ignoring the work of conception and thereby cutting itself off from a significant part of architectural reality. Theoretical work in architecture consists, *inter alia*, of analysing the very conception of buildings as opposed to the finished product. In fact, one cannot maintain that the design of a building depends on some kind of determinism. If such were the case, the diversity of responses generated by architectural competitions could not be envisaged. Moreover, retracing the genealogy of a project hardly allows one to have a clear idea of the mode of conception, particularly in the face of contingent events. Descriptive statements on design – although rich, abstruse, necessary – fall short of the mark. The mode of conception of a building is not accessible outright.

Professional criticism is indeed receptive to the work of conception. For example, Bernard Huet, commenting on the Institut du Monde Arabe, compares the solutions found by Jean Nouvel to those of his competitors in order to single out the appropriateness of Nouvel’s approach:

...what is considerably more important for me is the manner in which he operates “congenially” with existing buildings then in creating new situations. As proof of this, one needs only examine the projects submitted by the other architects competing for the project who ignored entirely Albert and Coulon’s neighbouring structures in order to overcome, by the sheer force of their writing, an imposed and uneasy cohabitation. Jean Nouvel’s

strength was to have understood that the success of the operation was conditioned from the outset by the volumetric mass, the dimension, and the geometry of the pre-existing buildings and that consequently, it would be useless to fight on unequal terms against them.

Although the interest of such a judgement cannot be denied, one might note that Bernard Huet remains here on the borderline of the inner workings of conception. He describes phenomena and effects that are the consequences and traces of operations inherent to conception, operations which architects must confront in the course of the process of design.

Apprehending architecture through the operations in which the architect takes and gives measurements to space constitutes the theoretical viewpoint of architecture; such a point of view functions by replacing facts within the context of the operations that produced them. The conceptual instrument of architecture has been constructed around the fundamental questioning to be applied to measurement; such instrument consists of a set of stable concepts which transcend particular details and allow for the interrogation of the modes of conception of architects.

To come back to Nouvel’s IMA example, aligning the volumetry with its immediate neighbouring area (i.e. horizontal block of the wine depot compound), continuing the parcellar curve through the north facade, distinguishing one facade that repeats the traits of the Haussmannian model from another that respects the strict geometry of Jussieu University: all are facts revealing the spaces of reference thanks of which Nouvel took measure, for the space at hand and in order to define the measurements for his project. As a compact building, the IMA terminates the constructed front section of the quay and opens up an esplanade facing Jussieu that gives us another perspective on Albert and Coulon’s architecture. It is in this manner that Nouvel renders its measurements to the site.

Segmentation of the site, segmentation of the references, segmentation of the object, all represent different types of segmenting which the architect sets in motion in order to give form to his project and to its allotted space. The programme is not spared segmen-

tation either as the library is neatly separated from the museum.

As opposed to a theoretical point of view which tries to identify operations of conception, a critical point of view refers the understanding of the built-as-a-whole to architectural trends or doctrines. Thus, adding further praise to the IMA, Bernard Huet associates it with "urban art as the art of accommodating what remains"¹⁵. Similarly, the treatment of the facades is scrutinized through different doctrines:

The technical and figurative logic of the curtain-wall is immediately contradicted by the fact that the north and south facades are different. This contrasting treatment could find its justification, as part of a rationale governed by modernist functionalism, in the simple fact of sunlight control. However, for Jean Nouvel, the situation is quite different; the rationale invoked is external to the inherent economy of the building; it is relegated to the law of analogical signs with which the author likes to dress up his works and which lead to the disquieting peculiarity of the renowned Moucharaby diaphragms in the south facade.¹⁶

By trying to understand what conceptual operations generated these facades or what problems they raised during conception a theoretical reading will run into the difficulty of the model and of its handling by Nouvel. At the IMA, one initial model of reference is Pierre Chareau's glass house where the facades are thought out as light processing machines. One other model is the technical model whose trace is the camera diaphragm which, depending on the sunlight, determines the luminosity of the library. The historical model is equally present with the Blondel door "integrated" into the north facade... The plurality of models and their interplay are related to the question of segmentation and come as a result of the plurality in the levels of conception; namely, those parts of the project which are defined independently. Instead of referring the comprehension of the conception in a general manner back to doctrinal biases, the theoretical approach will refer back to the specificity of the modes of conception.

Still concerning the IMA, a judgement by Jacques Lucan now allows us to also register the difference in

approach between theory and criticism:

We can understand how he (J. N.) wants to provide a setting for an "aesthetics of smoothness" by having recourse to the envelopement of structure with aluminum sheets, or to the coverage of plane surfaces whose homogeneity is accentuated through the pattern of grids and regular parallel and repetitive lines.¹⁷

Here, Jacques Lucan points out the presence of geometry in the project, but it would be interesting to comment on its function. True, at the IMA one of the essential functions of geometry is to render compatible, parts that are not necessarily so among themselves. Geometry thus acts as a comprehensive scale.

Whereas in those cases where criticism comments on effects connected to considerations often based on doctrinal convictions, theory will relate the architectural facts to a relevance concerning conception or to the thinking on space. The theoretical approach therefore situates itself outside biased positions and seeks to ascertain the intelligibility of conception as a set of operations put in motion to think out space.

Specificity of criticism

Although the theoretical approach does not take a position on the social and cultural values born by architecture, criticism does take given positions with respect to those values. We shall consider that – to paraphrase Todorov – architectural criticism should work from two perspectives. One involving theoretical description, which consists, inter alia, of establishing the relevances of architectural facts, and the other, involving the cultural values inherent to all realisations. For every building contributes to the establishment of spatial, social, and aesthetic values which are cultural. Today, criticism is asking questions, in the context of high-tech architecture, about the values proper to technological performance, and about the ability for architecture to engage dialogue with the city. Urban values, considered as a set of rules defining the organisation of historic cities, are always at the heart of debates even if placed only in opposition to the values of suburban or peripheral areas. Lastly, much has been written on the nature of those signs manipulated by contemporary ar-

chitecture whether it is expressed as virtual, immaterial, transparent, or on the contrary, post-modernist. On the other hand, little discussion is currently devoted nowadays to typical or conventional values. These values not only can but must be debated. Nevertheless the values of an architect's work cannot be fully discussed unless the work is totally intelligible; that is, unless the relevance of the architectural facts can be established. As it would not occur to anyone to discuss the meaning of a tragedy without taking into consideration the very form of the text, the characteristics of the literary genre, as well as the acting that the form will allow, it seems unlikely to analyse the values of a work of architecture without taking into account what has led to its design.

Criticism is faced therefore with a two-fold task: establishing the facts and making the design intelligible on the one hand and discussing the cultural values on the other. This double task will keep criticism at a distance from arbitrary value judgements, unlike that of doctrinal discourses. It requires an objective description of buildings based on the intelligibility of their design and on a dialogue with the values of the building.

At the conclusion of this overview, we can note that different types of criticism can be found in theoretical perspective as a means to reflect on objective criteria specifically characteristic of the architectural field. Furthermore, it would be unfortunate to neglect the need for dialogue which is intrinsically linked to criticism. Criticism presupposes a confrontation as it proceeds through its articulation in varied dimensions, such as the listening dimension (the realizations and their reception), the reflective dimension (encouraging debates on ideas), and the rhetorical dimension (dissemination of prevailing trends).

Most critics will agree that limiting oneself to value judgement results in the public being forced to turn to its own values. Thus, the public will project itself into the work, but it will miss the opportunity for indispensable dialogue with the work, a dialogue that implies a degree of openness. As opposed to an autistic criticism, experienced as an exercise in authority, we shall opt for a dialogue-oriented and polyphonic criticism, ready to begin a true debate with the work. Such a cri-

ticism, as a work in itself, and as an excitement for writing, represents today – in the era of a “media-oriented architecture” – the salt of criticism.

Notes

1. Frédéric Edelmann, “Un pavillon en creux pour Séville”, *Le Monde*, 16-03-90.
2. François Chaslin “Avec la ville l’un compose l’autre pas”, *Libération*, 28-04-86.
3. François Chaslin “Avec la ville l’un compose l’autre pas”, *Libération*, 28-04-86.
4. Werner Szambien, “Incerte frontiere tra storia e dell’architettura”, *Casabella* 547, juin 88.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Peter Collins, “La philosophie de la critique en architecture”, *A.M.C.* 8.
8. Alan Colqhoun, “Du bricolage au mythe”, *Recueil d’essais critiques*, P. Mardaga, Bruxelles, 1985.
9. Bruno Zevi’s writings, which the reader can consult, also treat this subject from the same viewpoint.
10. M. Tafuri undertook a criticism of operational criticism in *Théorie et histoire de l’architecture*, S. A. D. G., Paris, 1976.
11. Gavin Macrae-Gibson, *The Secret Life of Building*, M.I.T. 1985.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Roland Barthes, “Qu’est-ce que la critique” (1964), Quoted by T. Todorov in *Critique de la critique*, Le Seuil, 1984, p. 75.
14. Tzvetan Todorov, *Critique de la critique*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1984, p. 189.
15. Bernard Huet, *op. cit.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Jacques Lucan, “A propos de l’oeuvre de Jean Nouvel”, *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen*, No 3 1990.