



Opening the Floodgates. David Wild. (Courtesy of the artist.)

The Conundrums of Architectural Criticism

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Everyone likes the idea of architectural criticism; far fewer like the actual practice of architectural criticism. My experience is that the public loves it, but architects, editors, developers, advertisers, magazines, and newspapers often do not. This makes for some critical conundrums.

Architectural criticism is an art form that many of us would wish to flourish, but it has proven difficult to establish anywhere but handful of metropolises. The practice of architectural criticism rose in consort with the increasing popularity of newspapers in European, then American large cities, and then in topical magazines published in the same places. In English language, our contemporary culture of architectural criticism has its historical roots in the writings of two eminent Victorians.

From William Morris, we have inherited the idea of the architecture critic as activist. His writings on the preservation of historic buildings were calls to immediate action, and Morris as critic called down what he called “scrape”—the removal of layers of the historical meaning of buildings by Viollet-le-duc and others possessed of a romantic zeal to restore buildings to but one point in their diverse histories. The architectural criticism of urbanist Jane Jacobs and former *New York Times* critic Ada Louise Huxtable are continuations of Morris’s notion of invective prose aimed at resolving immediate issues.

John Ruskin established the tendency of the architecture critic as moralist. *The Stones of Venice* and even more *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* have a strong foundation in Ruskin’s fundamentalist, Calvinist Christian faith evident in ideas like “truth in structure” and “honesty in materials.” Ruskin’s architectural criticism combines muscular descriptive passages with deft interpretation of the moral, even spiritual, implications of architectural decisions. The moralizing tendency in architectural criticism was continued in Lewis Mumford’s “The

Skyline” column for the *New Yorker* magazine and in the editorship and writing of Peter Davey in his many years at the helm of *The Architectural Review* of London.

A third stream of development originated in German philosophy and art historical writing from Kant and Hegel to Heidegger and even Wittgenstein in the early twentieth century. Collectively, they produced theoretical texts and lyrical writings important to our current notions of interpreting and evaluating buildings. In parallel was the German tradition of art historical scholarship demonstrated in the writings of Wittkower and Semper. The conflux of these tendencies made for architectural criticism that validated architecture as an intellectually autonomous discipline, disengaging writing from the moralizing and strategic concerns of the Morris-Ruskin tradition. At its best, this writing is conceptually rigorous and un beholden to the distractions of the time and place of its creation, but at its worst, it can be pretentious philosophizing or pointless formal analysis.

This tendency lives on to this day in that narrow band of architectural criticism as practiced by architectural academics and curators and which is usually—and inaccurately—called “architectural theory.” It is important to note here that there is little place in contemporary academe for the Morris-Ruskin tradition and indeed for any active practice of architectural criticism that is evaluative and deals with contemporary buildings. On the other hand, that strain of architectural criticism that calls itself “theory” is carried on only in universities and art galleries, rarely affecting the actual design of buildings or the physical evolution of cities. This separation is itself a serious conundrum; one of my personal hopes for architectural criticism has always been for a reconciliation of these two tendencies.

Through the twentieth century, these traditions of criticism—with linked developments in

the French, Italian, and Spanish language architectural press—spread to non-Western countries. As architects in these parts of the world went through the paroxysms of modernization, there was nearly always a debate about the conflict between tradition and contemporary technology and another about national identity versus universal ideas and forms. Japan and Latin America first explored these debates in the early twentieth century, followed soon by the rest of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The new freedoms for the quotation of historical traditions in the Post Modern architecture of the 1980s sparked renewed critical debates in all these regions, and these discussions evolve simultaneously with those in Euro-American architectural culture. For example, references to ancient vernacular and religious building forms in the 1980s designs of Egyptian architect Abdel Wahed El-Wakil prompted a very interesting debate in the Islamic world about Post Modern uses of architectural history—a debate simultaneous with, and perhaps more considered than, the style wars occurring at the same time in the West. Yet another conundrum of architecture criticism is that debates like these have largely gone unnoticed by Western architectural media and academe.

Public criticism is fundamental to architectural culture, but its current precariousness has its roots in how architects are trained. More than any other art, science, or profession, public criticism of student design work is an integral part of the education of architects everywhere. Engineers and doctors have nothing like this emphasis on public criticism, and today, open “crits” or “reviews” are components of virtually all the world’s architecture schools. While architecture schools carry on regional traditions, and the emphasis in teaching varies from pragmatic building issues to formal and intellectual ambitions,

Continued on page 95

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Continued from page 9

architecture school reviews are nonetheless remarkably similar all around the world.

Yet, despite this—more likely because of it—critical comments that would hardly generate a murmur if applied to an actor's performance or the assumptions of a scientific brief precipitate shocked and appalled reactions from deeply offended practicing architects. Because I have written critical texts in newspapers and magazines about many other art forms and professions, the thin hides of architects have always surprised me. Perhaps, I should not be shocked because when architects lash out about criticism, there often seems to be a deeper psychological dimension to their protests. This is one of the conundrums of our field: the extensive use of architectural criticism as a teaching technique engenders a lifelong dislike of public debate and dialogue among too many practicing architects. Again, they love the idea of criticism but not its practice.

As someone who has taught design studio for a dozen years in architecture schools in four countries, for me the saddest aspect of this particular conundrum is that so little of what is said in architectural school "crits" is actually architectural criticism—the interpretation of the intellectual, tectonic, technical and social notions implicit in the design of buildings and cities. All too often, crits showcase other kinds of verbal performance, and all too often, only tangentially relate to the student design work under consideration. The long list of the nonsense that gets spoken in architecture school reviews these days starts but does not end with this list: big ego showboating; faux-intellectual fad-gadgetry borrowed from literary theory and cultural studies; private language idolatry by studio gurus; and the Masonic lingo invoked in the socialization into the architectural profession. I suspect many architects would react better to public criticism had

they received higher level and more focused critical commentary as students.

Criticism of any kind is extraordinarily difficult, requiring high-level writing and rhetorical skills. Architectural criticism is perhaps the most difficult of all because of the range and kinds of knowledge needed to do it but even more so because of the very importance of buildings and urban forms in shaping our lives. We architects practicing as critics are much like our colleagues who design buildings—it takes up the age of fifty to develop the writing and conceptual skills to practice our art with grace and effectiveness. The saddest conundrum of all is that we have fewer and fewer places to publish considered architectural criticism every year.

Because the public criticism of buildings is so difficult, dangerous, and debt inducing, the numbers of practicing critics are tiny. For example, all of us who live by writing on buildings in Canada can ride together in a taxi, and CICA (Comité International de Criticos de Arquitectura)—the global architecture critics' organization—has one hundred and twenty members. I have no doubt that there are rare subspecies of Himalayan moulds or Arctic sea slugs that rate more specialists looking at them than does commentary and exegesis on contemporary construction. In recent years, daily city newspapers have regularly abolished the post of architecture critic. This loss of a public forum is frequently instigated by the local development industry to eliminate irksome independent opinions—builders want solely their weekend "homes pages" advertorial coverage. It seems that the desire to control architectural criticism is not limited to designers.

The permanent post of architecture critic was removed from both Seattle newspapers a few years ago, and the same elimination of critical commentary followed more recently at both of Vancouver's broadsheets. Thus the entire northwest quadrant of North America—currently, one of the world's most interesting zones for new building and urbanism ideas—is without regular critical commentary. This is one of the cruelest conundrums of all: for one of

the most public of the arts of appreciation, there are fewer and fewer places to practice it. No local critics means little informed local commentary, but newspapers and magazines have filled this turn away from true criticism to filling column inches more cheaply with wire service celebrity journalism about a handful of international "starchitects." With changing times and economies, I am sure this obsession with celebs doing sculptures will fade, but the need for informed local critical inquiry will only increase.

The situation in architecture's professional press is not much better. Among the "glossies," the highest profile international English-language architecture magazines, only London's *The Architectural Review* maintains a regular commitment to criticism, as opposed to the descriptive and explanatory writing more common to design journals. While Toronto's *Canadian Architect* and New York's *Architectural Record* occasionally publish pointed criticism, critical writing is not a high priority among the information conglomerate corporations who own them, overriding the commitment to criticism by their current editors. Bluntly, we have so little architectural criticism because almost no one—least of all we critics—makes money from it. Urban magazines such as *Metropolis* and *Blueprint* do slightly better, but even the best of shelter magazines—such as the otherwise clever *Dwell* magazine—promote a kind of cheerleading promotional writing only occasionally and maybe even accidentally critical.

The new frontiers of architectural criticism are all electronic. For Radio France, François Chaslin has demonstrated how effective architecture can be in the aural space of a sound-only medium. There is much hope that the Internet will provide the forum so needed for architectural criticism. I find that my articles published in newspapers and magazines now have a lively afterlife, as they are picked up and commented on by information hubs and web content aggregators such as <http://www.ArchNewsNow.com>, fodder for bloggers and more specialist Web

sites. Oh bloggers—we had hoped you would lead the charge in the next critical wars—but why is so much of what you write uninformed, reactive, cranky and worst of all, dull? The critical conundrum here is that these new places for commentary are important, but by definition, they are diffuse, lacking the impact and import of ideas applied to local issues in a public way. As architecture critics, we are developing global publics but are less and less able, in the William Morris manner, to shape events and built culture close to home. We need another Ruskin—able to write simultaneously to specialist and general publics. Inspired by him, we need more “truth” and “honesty” in architectural criticism itself, and from the media outlets and academic institutions that are ever-more failing to support it.