

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM

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Any evaluation of architectural criticism, and any discussion as to its purpose and techniques, must presuppose one of two alternatives. Either it is simply a species or aspect of a general activity called "criticism" or an activity which must be considered *sui generis*. Historically, both concepts seem to have emerged in a literary form<sup>1</sup> at about the same time (i.e., in the middle of the 18th century) when Jacques-François Blondel introduced criticisms of Parisian buildings into his published lecture course and when Denis Diderot included criticisms of architectural drawings exhibited at the biennial *Salons*.

At first sight, the notion that architectural criticism is essentially a species of a general activity called "criticism" seems extremely attractive because we have been led by Renaissance humanists into paying unquestioned homage to the ideal of *Uomo universale* and have been conditioned by two centuries of transcendentalism into accepting the paradoxical idea that generalization is so superior to specialization that all forms, ideas and activities can be subsumed within some kind of conceptual unity. Hence the popular architectural notion of *Gestaltung*, whereby "the approach toward any kind of design—of a chair, a building, a whole town or a regional plan—should be essentially identical."

This philosophical concept of organic unity is not peculiar to our own profession, any more than the concept of the "unity of the arts" is peculiar to art historians. It is a general philosophical attitude shared by the Western world for many decades, whereby pedagogy is now conceived as something independent of, and superior to, what is taught; and salesmanship is now conceived as something independent of, and superior to, what is sold. It is thus only natural that we should initially regard criticism as something independent of, and superior to, what is criticized.

It may, however, be more fruitful, in the present context, to take the alternative point of view and consider architectural criticism as a very special activity related only to architecture. In so doing, we may also profitably subdivide this activity into four categories: popular criticism, lay criticism, professional criticism and self-criticism, considering each in turn.

## Popular criticism

By popular criticism I mean architectural criticism intended for the general public, and it will at once be apparent that the purpose of this type of criticism is radically different from that which we associate with journalistic criticisms of music, drama and the graphic arts. In general, the public reads criticisms of concerts, plays and exhibitions to find out whether to take the trouble of visiting them. But it bodes ill for the future of architecture if the popular critic of buildings is concerned simply with evaluating their scenic attraction.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with regarding architecture as a form of entertainment. Guided tours round the Lincoln Center are as innocuous as guided tours round the Piazza S. Marco. But the fundamental values of both groups of buildings extend far beyond the reactions of gaping tourists; and it is characteristic of the misapprehensions which can be caused by this kind of criticism that the greatest popularizer of the church of St. Mark, namely John Ruskin, had not the slightest understanding of, or sympathy with, Catholic liturgy or beliefs. Similarly, the architectural qualities of an opera house can only be assessed by people who enjoy operas, who have attended numerous operatic performances in this particular building, and whose experience of other opera houses gives them a basis for comparative evaluation.

These assertions may seem unnecessarily restrictive; but even if they are only partly true, they suggest that architectural criticisms acceptable to the popular press are of little value except as public relations and a means of advertising the architectural profession.

## Lay Criticism

By lay criticism I mean not only the layman's criticism of buildings seen or occupied but, most important of all, his criticisms of projects for commissioned buildings. Neither of these aspects of architectural criticism has received the attention it deserves, mainly, perhaps, because even when records exist, they are often incomplete or fragmentary. There are, however, a number of surviving published records which are particularly instructive, such as the various reports of Congressional or Parliamentary committees on the design of government buildings.





"Criticism by visitors to popular places such as Lincoln Center is more than anything a form of entertainment."

For example, there can be few more instructive chapters in the history of architectural criticism than the debate held in the British House of Commons on March 1, 1824, when Soane's enlargement of Westminster Hall (then used as a court of law) was subjected to parliamentary attack. During the debate, Henry Banks opined that "there was no modern architect whose works could be entirely commended," and objected to "the abominable taste in which new buildings of a different order of architecture had been grafted onto the old Gothic." Grey Bennet, taking full advantage of parliamentary privilege, asked who the architect was, "in order that the public might know whom to avoid." Charles Tennyson "animadverted in strong terms on the incongruous absurdities that were manifested in the modern additions of mongrel architecture." Sir J. Mackintosh said that "the system of undistinguishing destruction with respect to ancient royal palaces, and other venerable buildings, which had been so prevalent of late years, was not in unison with the feelings and sentiments of Englishmen," and demanded that new buildings should be in accordance with the *national* character (i.e., Gothic). Sir T. Baring referred to Nash's Brighton Pavilion as "the Kremlin." Even the Chancellor of the Exchequer "regretted quite as much as his honourable friend, the existence of the unpleasant excrescence of which he had so deservedly complained."

As a result, the House of Commons decided by a vote of 43 against 30 to establish a committee to inquire into the state of the Law Courts then being erected at Westminster Hall. The committee's report was tabled on May 14, 1824, and as a result, Soane was obliged to make many radical alterations which can be seen on the drawings preserved in the Soane Museum.

Extracts from this debate have been quoted extensively because they suggest that laymen had far more influence on the development of the Gothic Revival in England than historical text-books might lead us to suppose; and in our present age, when there is so much emphasis on architect's architecture, it seems important to stress the effect of clients' opinions in influencing architectural design. Conversely, in an age which still sympathizes with the 19th century romantic notion of the artist as either a heroic rebel or an intrepid pioneer, it seems worth emphasizing that no architectural criticism can afford to ignore the client's attitude both before and after the completion of a building.



"Westminster Hall, subject of constructive lay criticism with significant results."

### Professional Criticism

By professional criticism I mean criticism of architecture by architects for architects, and this can be subdivided into two groups: the criticism of finished buildings and the criticism of preliminary drawings. The professional usefulness of adequate and skillful criticisms of finished buildings is indisputable. Nevertheless, "adequacy" and "skill" are difficult terms to define conscientiously and may well imply notions which the editors of architectural periodicals will find impossible to accept.

For example, I have gradually come to the conclusion that no building can be assessed adequately in environmental terms unless the critic himself has lived in that environment. I doubt if any building can be assessed adequately in functional terms until many months after its occupancy. I do not see how full justice can be done to the architect's final design unless a wide selection of preliminary drawings and models are both illustrated and discussed. But editors of architectural magazines can hardly be expected to be sympathetic to theories of criticism which demand so much space, so much delay and so limited a choice of critics.

On the other hand, the criticism of preliminary drawings—especially competition drawings—has proved itself historically to be the most useful and vigorous type of professional criticism, and this was, generally speaking, the only type of criticism published in architectural periodicals a century ago. By escaping the futility of proposing ameliorations for the immutable (a dilemma inherent in all but the most lyrical criticisms of finished buildings) it enjoys both the validity and responsibility we associate with criticisms of the performing arts. Being concerned solely with the *interpretation* of drawings or models, the critic has as much right to speculate on their ultimate effectiveness as the architect responsible for their design.

It is for this reason that this type of criticism constituted the historical origin of modern architectural education. The *Concours d'émulation*, introduced systematically 200 years ago, have persisted because they provide the only method of comparing architectural solutions to a given problem and creating an awareness of the many possible relationships of small-scale drawings or models to the structural and spatial realities they are intended to represent.

In some schools of architecture, those who teach design are specifically described as "design critics." In other words,



our profession has instinctively recognized that, as far as the process of *creativity* is concerned, the essence of architectural education is architectural criticism. One might even go so far as to assert that the criticism of drawings and models intended to constitute projects for future buildings constitutes the only activity really worth describing as architectural criticism; for the so-called "criticism" of buildings which have already been erected is seldom at its best except when it is a type of history—an objective description of selected significant facts.

Unlike architectural journalism (where the evaluation of a building will only arouse public interest if it either describes novelties or condemns mediocrity), the criticism offered to architectural students by experienced practitioners and scholars is securely based on the knowledge that the audience is not only deeply involved but constantly on the alert for any inconsistencies or inadequacies in the evaluations given. A student demands that criticisms of his work be lucid analyses of specific virtues or failings, and not simply witty expressions of sentimental enthusiasms or dislikes. If a design, which a student thinks is brilliantly original, should seem in the critic's opinion to be neither, then that opinion must be justified verbally with clarity and erudition. If the student's novelties are manifestly inappropriate or unconstructable, he must be given convincing and experienced arguments for their suppression.

Such criticisms are not recorded or published. They are not subject to those methods of electronic information retrieval which constitute the criteria of academic or literary stature. But they are powerful forces available for improving the environment in which we live. For each student can be made to see that the dialogue between his teacher and himself is

simply an exercise in one aspect of the process of design, which he must learn to perform in solitude once his academic training is at an end. For there is no difference between criticism and self-criticism except the number of people involved.

### Self-Criticism

The intrinsic involvement of criticism in the creative process of literature and music is beyond dispute, so widespread is the evidence provided by marginal corrections and revised scores. But this involvement is just as great in all the creative processes of the human mind, even if its evidence in some disciplines is more obscure. The distinction made by our leading structural engineers (such as Mario Salvadori) between "design" and "analysis" is, in fact, a distinction between intuition and self-criticism, even though the essentially mathematical quality of this criticism seems to set it apart from the more subjective and frequently uncertain self-criticism of the architect.

Nevertheless, every evaluation of an intuitively conceived form is a criticism, and criticism implies criteria. How to establish architectural criteria, and how to use them, is beyond the scope of this essay; but if what has so far been written has demonstrated the practical value of architectural criticism, both architectural practitioners and architectural students can at least be encouraged to work out the criteria for themselves.

### NOTES:

1. Verbal criticisms of buildings are presumably as old as architecture itself, and some have survived in documentary form, as for example, Bernini's views on French architecture reported in Fréart de Chantelou's diary (published in 1885). However, I doubt if the systematic publication of criticisms of buildings by architects, art critics or teachers of architecture antedates 1750, though occasional critical allusions to architecture are to be found in essays and satirical verse.

John Nash: Royal Pavillion, Brighton—as remodelled (1815 - 23)

