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The changing role of critique in architecture

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With the emerging information revolution, it makes little sense to continue to “critique” architecture according to the accepted, historical practice. That was the product of an era of “experts”, rightfully or wrongly assigned the role of judges for what was good or not good; of identifying what product of human creation and ingenuity rose above the merely ordinary and was thus worthy of singling out for praise. We had more than a century of that model, and it is now fading out along with other practices in the old world style of thinking.

Contemporary critique re-defines the topic in its entirety. It turns its attention more to populism and away from elitism — such as has been the basis for critique for several generations now. The need for this drastic change is the phenomenal growth of social media. Today, the opinions of the interested masses are instantly registered into the vast information pool upon which society draws for its enlightenment. The voice of the individual has become as powerful as the voice of the considered expert once was. Maybe not the isolated individual, but certainly the “cybercritic” created when multiple opinions coming from the interaction of social media merge, and then move as a single entity in the space of information.

We have to accept what was hitherto forbidden: popular taste, which more often than not ran completely opposite to highbrow taste in the arts and architecture. The voice of authority from above has now significantly weakened and runs the risk of being drowned out by shouts from the crowd. Criticism, if it is to survive as a serious endeavor that helps our culture, needs to take popular taste into account, rather than stubbornly trying to mold it into what the critic thinks it ought to be. This re-orientation breaks completely from past practice. For architecture, it means returning to more traditional models and typologies while at the same time trying to identify innovation and creativity. Because the danger of embracing popular taste is that we sink into re-cycled banalities — which perhaps had a creatively valid ancestor at some point in the distant past — but in their most current incarnations, are nothing other than kitsch.

So, how to return to more traditional and more popular tastes without throwing out innovation, art, and creativity? I offer my own ideas here that have to do with (i) science and (ii) popular participation. Let me tackle science first.

Science tells us what the human body and its information-processing system respond to: either positively or negatively. Much of the contemporary critique of architectural forms and spaces unfortunately either ignores or contradicts our bodily signals, and instead offers an opinion along ideological lines. An elite follows the fashion as dictated by
experts, whereas common people respond to their own emotions and naturally prefer entirely different forms and typologies. Up until now, critics have dismissed this dichotomy as simply poor taste, but it’s not that at all. Its roots are biological: the innate physiological and psychological preferences for certain forms and combinations. This includes as a primary component the phenomenon of biophilia, which is the instinctive attraction for natural forms and structures. An elite isolated from nature and earthly emotions can indeed detach itself from biophilia, but then it loses its credibility among the majority.

With experimental data coming from clinical measurements, and a profoundly deeper knowledge of how the human body and brain operate in response to specific architectural environments, we can finally base architectural critique upon solid science. If any aspects of this knowledge contradict accepted practice and notions of style, then science has to be given the priority.

If architects and architectural critics don’t like introducing science into criticism, they like popular judgment even less. I propose trusting the common person with their instinctive judgment of architectural form and space. Ignore for a moment all the vast body of precedent set up by existing critique, and try to rely instead upon the emotions and logic of an untrained observer. Can 20th Century theory survive this test? I think that most of it cannot, and it must go to the pile of discarded theories that ultimately failed the test.

The idea of people participating in designing their own living environment has been anathema to formal design, yet this is the way most of the world is actually built, since the beginning of the human race. Families build their own houses; communities participate as a group to help a person build their house according to inherited typologies; world cities are still mostly self-built out of available low-cost materials, etc. The phenomenon of an architecture that offers itself for critique is but a minuscule portion of the world’s total building activity. So, why keep the two separate? What is more democratic than asking people to actively participate in designing their own environment? I mean direct, actual design — not the watered-down version of a superficial talk with the client, who is often NOT the final user.

Can the architectural critic, a member of the higher economic strata of a developed society, engage in a dialogue with the self-builder of a slum dwelling? Or with an indigenous builder who follows their instinct to ornament their dwelling space? And really engage on an equal status, definitely not as a member of the elite condescending to look down on someone inferior; because then this act becomes insulting and racist.

Such a notion was rejected during the past several decades, because popular taste tends to be diametrically opposite of any current architectural fashion or theory. And thus the people’s opinion was sacrificed in order not to threaten the abstract notions of critique — what “good” design was supposed to be, as defined by 20th Century tradition. If those principles, upon which all of academic critique was based, have to go, then so be it. Popular taste, whether influenced by the traditional media or not, will eventually rule
because of the liberating power of social media. We might as well anticipate this turning point by incorporating it into an honest and robust framework for critique.

All of this is not without its strong political implications. Politics mixes up with critique in a messy and contradictory manner that cannot easily be unraveled. Conservatives are often more in alignment with the common people who also prefer traditional typologies at heart. Because of political polarization, however, conservatives are not usually focused upon helping the poor through architectural applications such as social housing. The Left draws upon the Marxist rejection of the past to propose “new” forms, but in so doing, it denies human evolution and ends up supporting inhuman architectural and urban typologies.

The real power in today’s global economy is neither the conservative Right nor the Marxist Left, but an exploitative consumerist network of international money. This ruling class controls Capital but is not conservative, because it does not value tradition or inherited culture. It is willing to do anything at all — to embrace the Marxist call to erase the past — not so as to liberate poor people from any oppression but rather to enrich itself through energy-wasting and unsustainable building schemes.

These three political players have been imposing their philosophy on architecture and urbanism on the media (through propaganda), disguised up to now as critique. But that does not provide the basis for a genuine and unbiased critique of the built environment. It goes without saying that this corruption of critique by special interests has not gone unnoticed by the social media. If we don’t undertake the necessary revisions now, critique as an intellectual endeavor will become trivial and meaningless.