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Reasons to be Critical

by Pierre Chabard, Valéry Didelon, Françoise Fromonot

in *Yours Critically. Writings on architecture from issues 1-10 of Criticat*, 2016.

In professional circles as in society at large, the regret is often voiced that architectural criticism is dead. The complacency of commentaries on new buildings which appear in journals and newspapers, on the one hand, and the success of an abstract academic approach of architectural “theory”, on the other, seem to have conspired to disqualify more incisive attempts to elucidate the motives and effects of architecture, although a quintessentially social — and therefore public — art. At a time when, in Western countries at least, the optimism of globalisation’s early years has given way to an enduring economic crisis, calling for criticism could easily pass for a provocation. Should we not defend architecture, support a struggling profession, celebrate its hard-won accomplishments rather than wonder how to be critical about them?

Criticism in crisis

Criticat was founded on the hypothesis that criticism is never as badly needed as in a moment of crisis. For as suggested by its oft-quoted etymology, criticism has to do with crisis. Not a suffered crisis but a generative one, of the dynamic kind: a deliberate action aimed at questioning the *status quo* that purposefully disturbs an established balance in order to inflect it beyond its tipping point and overcome accepted thinking. An art of discomfort, criticism is about surveying facts and stakes to reveal cracks, unearthing paradoxes in order to get a chance to trigger debate, renewing the way we look at things and, hopefully, opening up fresh perspectives. So isn’t now the best time for such criticism to extract architecture and urbanism from the cul-de-sac in which they seem to be stuck? For the latest economic crisis has only exacerbated the ideological crisis architecture is going through as a discipline, as evidenced by the ossification of the theoretical reappraisals initiated from the mid-1950s onwards and their reduction to formal tricks.

For some four decades now, the possibility of being critical has been largely inhibited (and this applies well beyond the scope of architecture) by the consequences of the main evolution that has shaped the way our societies function and present themselves. The so-called liberal turn replaced the ideological supremacy of the socialist driven model, embodied for instance in the welfare state, leading to the pluralistic stance of post modernism (the famous “anything goes”) and its characteristic inversion of the previously prevailing hierarchy between utopia and reality. Since the turn of the millennium, the triumph of economics over politics in the wake of globalisation has resulted in an

increasing — and successful — attempt to *naturalise* these dominant economic forces, under the guise of their identification with the ubiquitous, invisible “hand” of the Market. The typically modernist claim that societies could forge their own destiny has given way to the assertion that the events shaping society are inevitable, somehow beyond human control: *fatal*.

Within and beyond

In these conditions, can criticism be restored as a means of empowerment and, if so, how? Can architectural criticism open up some of the questions raised by architecture in and for society? Contemporary architectural discourse seems caught between two equally debatable positions. On the one hand, architecture is discussed as an autonomous branch of aesthetics, and the fundamentals of the discipline are cultivated at a safe distance from the turmoil of the world. But such internal commentary falls short of the mark when faced with the current phenomena that inform the production of spaces of everyday life, especially since, as is well known, 95 per cent of what affects our built environments escapes the scope of the architects’ action.

Conversely, it has been argued that architects should learn from and conquer all kinds of other fields — from graphic design to world economics — in order to have their say in the conduct of general affairs. Accordingly, they should become expert designers in anything ... but architecture. “Fuck the building” as recently suggested by some? One may still consider that building buildings or getting involved in urban planning are somehow relevant to the job.

So what kind of architectural criticism can exist between “within” and “beyond”, seen as two opposite modes of resignation? How can we devise a publication on architecture that wouldn’t be just an architects’ publication? More prominently perhaps than any other kind of human activity, architecture encompasses many different fields, each with their own stakes, constraints and protagonists. Being dependent on politics and economics, related to aesthetics and making, engaged with geography, history, and social issues, it is an ideal platform from which to observe and understand the world at large in a concrete and operative way. Rather than explain and justify architecture with an elaborate set of cultural and social considerations, *Criticat* therefore strives to examine society and culture from the vantage point of architecture: as a way to try to reintegrate it into everyday issues and discussions.

In praise of independence

As for the exceptional works of architecture unanimously deemed worthy of publishing, they could gain credibility and even pertinence if uncompromisingly scrutinised by critics.

Unconditional celebration of buildings and their architects, great or small, is deadly. It prevents the construction of a thorough body of knowledge on those works, leaves practitioners with their more or less avowed dilemmas, sterilises debate by killing autonomous thinking and its expression: in the profession, in architecture schools, and in the public. The rhetoric of admiration even proves counterproductive for those architects who cherish it most; faint or true, praise can actually be damning. It is urgent to reinstate a culture of irreverence, to launch polemics, to recognise the virtues of controversy. Critics should take the risk of renewing with dissenting criticism, as long as it is constructed with traceable arguments. It would be naive to imagine that this can have an immediate, tangible effect on architecture. But these raised voices can instil and ultimately reinstate the simple idea that criticising is possible, and may even be contagious.

As an antidote to the omnipresent pr blurbs that tend to airbrush architectural projects, to render their result so evident as to leave little or nothing to be discussed, one of the first roles of critics could be to make facts available for all to appropriate and form their own opinion. This entails properly investigating any subject considered, including, the given project, the commissioner, the programme, the political issues and economical stakes that surround, or even determine it. It requires breaking with the standard press procedures, shunning professional visits, and avoiding commissioned pictures and official graphic documents, all usually supplied by architects or their clients. At present, conflict of interest is inherent to most architecture journals: architects are both their main readers and the main providers of the material that they publish. Building a critical independence from the architectural profession therefore seems paramount in order to generate distance or ... proximity. Because independence gives the critic license to disagree, it can also allow a different kind of dialogue to build up with chosen practices, leading to productive investigations into often overlooked aspects of their *modus operandi*.

Architecture is obviously a complex issue: making it accessible to motivated, curious readers and not only to specialists also means working on the way criticism is written, eschewing jargon — more often than not an abuse of power, and synonymous with ready-made thinking. Starting a new journal was a way to build a place of our own, where these ideas could be tried and tested by a small bunch of architect-historians eager to join forces. Criticism is sharper, more political and more effective when envisaged as a collective construct.

Criticism: a risk, an opportunity

Taken as a lens that reveals its own political implications, architecture can become the basis of a broader critique. Rather than a discussion of the ins and outs of the initial building's form, an inquiry into the painstaking reconversion of Frank Gehry's American Center in Paris provides an insight into the relationship between architecture and its

commissioning institutions. The controversy surrounding new high-rise buildings in Paris exposes the challenges of this issue for the new municipal administration and the strategic use by politicians of architecture and architects. The history of the alterations to the modernist building of the Jussieu faculty over the years demonstrates the shifting idea this society has of its university. The case study of a new light bridge designed for Haiti by an architect involved in an ngo highlights a possible connection between structural thought and territorial development. Each of the articles gathered in this volume thus tries to shed an unexpected light on aspects of our contemporary condition.

Integral to the *Criticat* project is the intention to reassert and renew with the role of the critic as an intellectual, who delves into issues chosen for their potential to elucidate the state of things and to fuel debate — an idea of his/ her role and responsibility that exceeds by far the specific cultural situation in which *Criticat* was born. For this to happen, we believe that architecture must be reaffirmed as a production — of buildings and ideas — as well as a marker of culture. *Criticat* wants to take a positive bet on the capacity of architectural criticism to give society at large a better grasp of the making of its environments, and therefore a chance to influence their evolutions. With this anthology of some two dozen articles produced in the first five years of the *Criticat* experiment, we wish to share — and offer to criticism — our modest contribution to this somewhat vaunting ambition.