

# Citeations

## Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science

Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983, 400 pp., 87 illus., \$30.

Reviewed by Bruce C. Webb

*Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* has been eagerly awaited by many in Houston who know its author, Alberto Pérez-Gómez. It was the good fortune of the University of Houston's College of Architecture to have Pérez-Gómez as a faculty member during the time he was revising and polishing the book's manuscript. He is a remarkable and insightful teacher who has the rare ability to give shape and clarity to a design idea without losing its essence. In many ways, this book is a continuation of conversations shared by students and faculty with Pérez-Gómez before he went to Carleton University to direct its architecture program.

For an age which has become accustomed to taking its dialogues and lessons in architectural theory (and just about everything else) in simpler and smoother doses, Pérez-Gómez's book is likely to be a difficult and even troubling feast. It is a profoundly serious book which stretches across 200 years of architectural history, from the advent of modern science in the 17th century to the beginnings of the modern period in the early 19th century. The history reaches deeply into its subject and arrives at its conclusions by the long and scholarly route. But plotted within this historical narrative is a more impassioned and deliberately critical appraisal of the modernist predicament, a situation in which architecture has lost its ability to reconstruct in any meaningful way the relationship between science and myth. The historical context within which architecture is discussed is presented as a relentless process by which science and mathematics came to be understood as tools and techniques which now dominate present architectural theory and practice rather than as sources of revelation. While the historical narrative is rich and thick with details, it coalesces at many points along the way with extremely powerful and even poetic insights.

Pérez-Gómez argues that modern architecture and the crisis of meaning it faces has roots in a historical process touched off by the Galilean revolution in which science and the scientific method created a radical reorientation in how the world was to be viewed. The epistemological framework from Descartes forward split the problem of knowing into subjective and objective questions, concentrating attention on the latter where the scientific method could create the illusion of certainty. The inability to reconcile these two dimensions of thought — the formal or syntactic with the transcendental or semantic — has enormous implications for architecture.

During the 18th century, truth came to be regarded not as what could be perceived, but rather as what could be conceived with mathematical clarity. Scientific theories of the time were neatly reconciled with religion through various deistic notions which proclaimed God the "Great Geometer" and made a religious quest out of the scientific method. The subsequent ascendancy of this method in the 19th century in every sector of western thought brought about a questioning of the conceived relationship between number, geometry, and the divine. Finally, a total separation of faith and reason into two unequal and distinct dimensions of thought occurred.

While the book revolves around the issues of scientific analysis and poetic reconciliation, this is not another of those dualistic struggle books, like Wojciech Lesnikowski's *Rational and Romanticism in Architecture*, which tries to reshape the concept of history into a simplistic struggle between symmetrical opposites. Instead, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* moves more intricately, treating not only the ideas that fit the book's argument but also the ambiguities and complexities that make the situation discussed so difficult. If the historical analysis seems inordinately complicated it is because Pérez-Gómez has dealt fairly with his historical personae, treating them not as straw men but as enormously complex individuals. The story here is less one of opposite camps locked in a proto-human struggle than a portrayal of an evolving architecture. Caught in a powerful current of shifting values and methods, the historical characters are trying to

make some sense through architecture of their situation. Against this background, Pérez-Gómez portrays the decline in the semantic dimension of architecture.

Much of the book's history explores architectural ideas first manifested in the royal academies of France. Some relatively obscure or overlooked figures such as Bernard Palissy, who investigated the mythical dimension of the Baroque geometrical garden, are examined. Better known figures like Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Etienne-Louis Boullée, who "transformed theory into poetry and coherently synthesized the dimensions of *mythos* and *logos*," are reinterpreted in the light of the book's argument. Subsequent chapters recount developments in the technical instruments of architecture, including mensuration, stereotomy, statics, and strength of materials ultimately leading to "scientific building" and to J.N.L. Durand, an influential professor who taught at the Ecole Polytechnique at the turn of the 19th century. This architect bundled together the rational baggage of his predecessors and emerged as the final link to functionalist modernism.

Durand established a theory of architecture that was pure technique. Using the Cartesian grid as an ordering system and discarding the symbolic connotations that surrounded number and geometry altogether, Durand formulated a method for making architecture that brought together the growing knowledge of construction science with rational plan making. Durand's emphasis on functional planning provided a clear separation between the Ecole Polytechnique and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which maintained a tradition of romantic formalism. In an age that was beginning to witness the triumphs of technical and scientific know-how, the practices espoused by Durand were understandably well received. By demystifying architectural design, by making it into a technical rather than a poetic activity, Durand was able to merge with the spirit of his age, an age that was seeing its most spectacular works directed not by architects, but by engineers. Prince Albert, the Prince Consort of England, was said to have observed, "If we want any work done of an unusual character and send for an architect, he hesitates, debates, trifles; we send for an engineer and he does it."

The last chapter of the book — on Durand and on Charles Francois Viel's subsequent critique of Durand — is particularly illuminating in light of Durand's pivotal role in providing a foundation for modern architectural theory. Viel, whose work was largely ignored as being reactionary in his own time, was a vociferous critic of Durand and his methods at the Polytechnique. To Viel, the students of this "systems approach" to architecture were neither well-versed as builders nor as artists; in reducing the problem of building design to studio exercises of recipes plotted on gridded plans, they understood neither the real issues of construction nor the historical principles that informed and guided great art. Calling the students and faculty at the Polytechnique "the physicomathematical faction" and "the engineers of the Ecole Polytechnique," Viel condemned Durand for reducing the understanding of architecture to the lowest common denominators of speed, efficiency, and function. In view of the elaborate character of Viel's criticism and the subsequent emergence of Durand's influence over modern architectural theory, it is not difficult to understand why Durand is remembered and Viel is nearly forgotten.

William Barrett, in his book *The Illusion of Technique*, covered similar ground by showing how the ritual content of technique has been systematically assimilated by the structure of modern technology. Barrett, like Pérez-Gómez, argues that philosophy is the historical source of technology in the modern sense. Barrett's critique is for philosophy, whereas Pérez-Gómez takes these issues outside the realm of pure thought and uses them to reaffirm the historical position of architecture as a mirror of ideas. In doing this he has also taken architecture outside the social dialectic that surrounded and helped to shape architectural theory in the modern period. The attempt

to link architectural theory with various political or economic ideologies is so fraught with dead-ends and contradictions that one can hardly blame the author for not digging into this can of worms. It is clear that the book resists this kind of speculation as symptomatic of the crisis. The results of which are usually capitalist formalism or Marxist rationalism, both of which turn architecture into empty propaganda and its theories into justifications.

The larger issue considered here is philosophical and the argument is perhaps easier to make for the general case, i.e., for philosophy, than for architecture. Because it is a reality of ideas rather than an idea of reality, architecture is inextricably bound up in a much broader spectrum of issues and constraints than the book seems to acknowledge. But Pérez-Gómez has clearly accomplished what he set out to do as a historian — to tell us the history of how we got to where we are.

Pérez-Gómez's "Theoretical Sequel" acknowledges some hope in the Romantic dreams of Lequeu, in Gaudí's "edible architecture," in Kiesler's Surrealism, and in movements like Art Nouveau and Expressionism before concluding that "truly meaningful architecture has been, by necessity, the exception rather than the rule over the last two centuries." The sequel further cites the success of contemporary phenomenology in helping to indicate the failure of technology alone to come to terms with the fundamental problems of architecture, stating, finally, that "the reconciliatory mission of the architect is poetic." This statement recalls the similarly challenging conclusion of Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Existence, Space and Architecture*. But where Norberg-Schulz attempts to spell out the terms and the structural "grammar" of the poetics of dwelling, Pérez-Gómez has provided the historical sources of understanding from which we are to construct our own poetic reconciliation.

There are two small but annoying points of criticism about the book's design. First, the footnotes are inconveniently located at the end, making it difficult to connect them with the text. While this is a minor matter for the source notes, it is a real problem for those notes which expand on points in the text. It would have greatly enhanced the readability of the book if the latter could have been placed at the bottom of the pages to which they refer. Second, the text is accompanied by a number of archival illustrations that are extremely interesting. But the textbook format has restricted the size and the quality of the reproductions, often diminishing their usefulness. In most instances, the illustrations would have benefited from more detailed and generous explanatory captions. There is not the level of integration of text and visual material one would hope for in a book of this type. Illustrations are treated somewhat indifferently, more I think by the publisher than the author, a real disappointment given the potential value of these illustrations as a primary, historical resource.

I suppose *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* might attract a wider and more popular audience if it had developed its argument more in the arena of contemporary effects and implications than through a historical perspective. And I suspect that many people will come to know the central ideas in this book through the writing of others who will do just that. Richard Sennett in his little book, *The Uses of Disorder*, for example, was able to construct a valuable and extremely relevant critique of modern planning with its emphasis on theories of scientific analysis and predicative tools rather than the transactions of real life. I am certain that in the next 20 years we will be wrestling with the problems of shifting paradigms and values. The issues and ideas covered in *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* will have to be dealt with. Hints of this have begun to appear around the edges of every discipline with a conscience, including the sciences. Given the eroding process by which ideas gain popularity, it is good that we have at hand a book so well thought out, so carefully researched, and so uncompromising to return to.

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# Citeations

## Jules Guerin: Master Delineator

Farish Gallery, Rice University  
Sponsored by the School of Architecture, Rice University  
10 October - 4 December 1983

Reviewed by Peter Holliday

Although "Jules Guerin: Master Delineator," emphasizes architectural renderings, the exhibition and catalogue also reveal other aspects of this man's multi-faceted life and career. Guerin as illustrator, muralist, and perhaps most importantly, visionary of the City Beautiful movement are all explored. As a result, the viewer not only came away from the show with a keener appreciation of the artist, but also left with a better understanding of the complex nature of architectural rendering.

Mark Hewitt, assistant professor of architecture at Rice University's School of Architecture, outlines what is known of Guerin's training and early career in the introductory essay to the catalogue. In Paris before the turn of the century, Guerin studied the handling of monumental academic subjects as well as the problems of small-scale composition and watercolor illustration. The latter training led to his first steady work for *The Century Magazine*, a commission secured through his friend Maxfield Parrish. The Farish Gallery exhibition demonstrated this phase of his career with a selection of his 1904 illustrations for "The Chateaux of Touraine." The majority of works shown in the exhibition, however, were his more famous architectural perspectives.

This type of architectural rendering grew in importance during the 19th century, especially in England. Such renderings emphasize the qualities which distinguish the architecture of that period. They illustrate texture, color, the nature of site and placement, scale, detail, and ultimately a sense of the Romantic and the Picturesque.<sup>2</sup> Such renderings give us an artist's impression. These are not the mathematically precise diagrams of an engineer.

In his 1912 book, *Architectural Drawing and Draughtsmen*, Sir Reginald Blomfield made clear the role of architectural renderings at this time. "A difference at once presents itself in architectural drawings according to the intention with which they are made. This intention may be either objective or subjective; that is, the intention of the draughtsman may be either to make drawings which can be carried out in the building by other hands exactly as drawn, or, on the other hand, he may wish to produce in somebody else's mind the impression of the building as a whole as he conceives it, or he may employ architectural forms as the symbols and embodiments

of some abstract idea, the imagery of a world which has never existed in fact, and never can."<sup>3</sup>

The best art of Jules Guerin, according to these definitions, is subjective. His are not the plans, elevations, sections, or geometrical working drawings used to convey precise information to the builder. Geometrical drawings are abstractions, diagrams as opposed to views of the completed work. While the architect can interpret such abstractions, the public cannot. Guerin's renderings form a bridge between the architects for whom he worked and their clients.

The success of Guerin's perspectival renderings depends upon his skill, imagination, and honesty. Yet herein lies a paradox. Ever since the rules of perspective were worked out in the Renaissance, it has been known that perspective is never truly honest; a convincing impression depends to a certain extent upon artistic license. The artist must manipulate the rendering so that the eye will take in more than any "true" perspective drawing or photograph.

The English architect R. Phené Spiers appreciated this in his influential book, *Architectural Drawing*: "The objects to be attained in preparing a perspective of a building are, firstly, to assure the designer of the correctness of his intention with reference to his design; and, secondly, to convey to a committee or the public some idea of the ultimate effect of the building when executed. It necessarily falls short of this, because it demands one fixed point of view, and anyone looking at a building is not content with that but carries his eye from one end to the other, and looks at it from many points of view. The public, as a rule, also fails to estimate correctly from a drawing of any description the proportion, mass, or scale of a building; and, unless the drawing be actually looked at from the selected station-point, the proportions at the extremities of the picture are apt to appear distorted."<sup>4</sup>

According to this quotation, a perspectival rendering thus is made in advance of the actual construction of a building. The drawing is a representation of something that does not yet exist. A 19th century Picturesque license thus lies behind Guerin's masterfully correct perspectival renderings. (Note the Barbizon School color scheme, subject matter, and composi-



Lincoln Memorial, 1912, Jules Guerin, delineator

tion of the watercolor painting *Rural Scene*; cat. no. 1.)

The Picturesque emphasized the importance of the building in its landscape, the very thing which could not be conveyed by geometrical elevations. With the Romantic taste for the sublime, form and mass grew in importance. The inspiration of Neoclassical compositions was felt, including the influence of Piranesi, whose richness of tone and depth gave added drama to his renderings of the ruins of Rome.

In his early topographical view of the *North Canal and Portal of Agriculture Building, World's Columbian Exposition* (ca. 1893, cat. no. 2), Guerin indicates the artistic direction of his work. He places the portal at the edge, emphasizing the grandeur of the buildings and the boundless vistas. Guerin also made realistic pictures where no solid, three-dimensional reality existed. In his *Fountain Basin, North Facade: St. Louis Art Museum* (cat. no. 4) Guerin placed the focus of the composition beyond the building itself. As Hewitt points out, the unorthodox and Picturesque point of view stresses the monumentality of the building and its setting.

By the beginning of the 20th century, architects were anxious to secure perspectivists of the highest quality, and Guerin was one of the most capable working in America. Hewitt has done the architectural and scholarly communities a service by having mounted the first exhibition of the work of Jules Guerin. However, the extant scholarship on Guerin is scant, and further work needs to be done to establish securely his unique contributions to the history of architectural delineation. One looks forward to future works about Jules Guerin.

### Notes

1. Mark A. Hewitt was guest curator of the exhibition and prepared the catalogue.
2. Gavin Stamp, *The Great Perspectivist*, London, Royal Institute of British Architects, 1982, 7-9.
3. Sir Reginald Blomfield, *Architectural Drawing and Draughtsmen*, London, 1912, 5.
4. R. Phené Spiers, *Architectural Drawing*, London, Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1887, revised edition 1902, 23.

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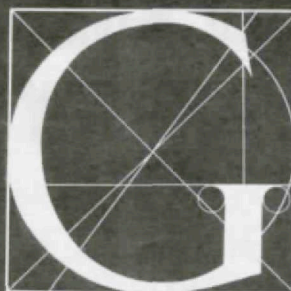
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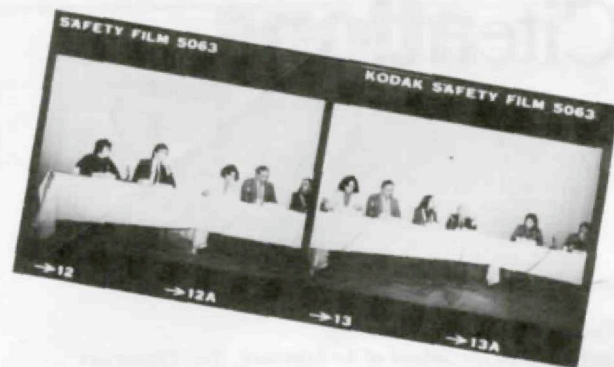
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# Critics on Criticism

## The Role of the Press/Criticism in Architecture



(Photos by Michael Thomas)

edited by John Kaliski

On 25 January 1984, The Rice Design Alliance, with the support of the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald D. Hines, Robert and Steve Ley, and Moody-Rambin Interests, sponsored a symposium titled *The Role of the Press/Criticism in Architecture* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. A sold-out Brown Auditorium witnessed an at-times heated debate where the panelists matched intellects and wits under the guiding presence of moderator Peter Papademetriou, professor at the School of Architecture, Rice University, architect, and critic.

The symposium panel was composed of both local and nationally recognized critics and writers and included Peter Blake, former editor of *Architectural Forum*, author, and present chairman of the Catholic University of America Department of Architecture; David Dillon, architecture critic for the *The Dallas Morning News*; Diane Ghirardo, Texas A&M University College of Architecture professor and editor of the San Francisco design journal *Archetype*; Joseph Giovannini, design reporter for the *New York Times*; Ann Holmes, fine arts editor of the *Houston Chronicle*; Pamela Lewis, design writer of the *Houston Post*; and Suzanne Stephens, an editor at *Vanity Fair* and the evening's keynote speaker.

Stephens began the symposium with an address which outlined some of the problems of architectural criticism, presented a brief history of architectural discourse in the United States, and provided examples of conflicting evaluations of historically important structures by well-known architects. According to Stephens, much of what passes for criticism today is in fact little more than descriptive writing of buildings and places. On the other hand, she noted that criticism which takes a rigorous intellectual tact too often degenerates into blind ideological gesturing which prevents the critic from evaluating the building on its own material terms. While it is not helpful or educational for the reader to describe a building as merely "good," "pleasant," or "wonderful," this writer stated that it was equally mystifying to the reader if the critic hid behind ideological smokescreens which require indoctrination into the world of architectural buzz words, rhetoric, and theory.

In summing up her talk, Stephens outlined the questions she

felt critics should ask and the criteria she used in evaluating the built environment. First, what are architects' intentions when they design a building and how do their experiences of their completed buildings differ from that of everyday users? Second, how does a building stand up to use over time? Shouldn't there be more evaluation of buildings long after they are completed? Finally, Stephens pointed out that a piece of criticism is only as good as the questions the critic chooses to ask. "Why," she said, "is not a bad place to start." Suzanne Stephens ended her talk on a more philosophical note. "[Criticism of architecture] holds up for a time, then it drops away, then it comes back again like all assessment . . ."

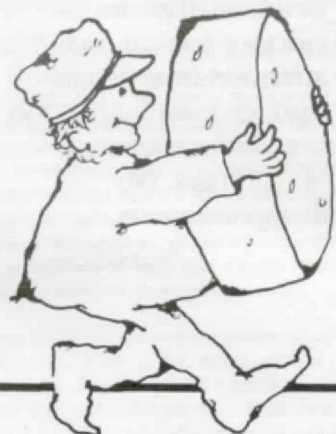
Peter Papademetriou, in his role as moderator of the panel, next elaborated on some of Stephens's points and introduced another idea which later in the evening became a point of dispute. Papademetriou claimed that there is an increasing momentum to report everything and anything. However, along with this voracious appetite for news for the sake of news goes the danger of a superficial treatment of the subject matter. Papademetriou kept bringing the evening's conversation back to this idea and at the same time attempted to focus the panel's talk on some of Stephens's points. As the following excerpted transcripts show, the symposium, while not always totally focused, was pithily educational. — J.K.

**Papademetriou:** Let's start with the issue of readership. What kind of readership does one find in architectural criticism? Who is the market, how might it be addressed, and how do you hone those differences?

**Blake:** When I was the editor of *Architectural Forum*, we initially belonged to Time-Life. Time, Inc. believed in big circulation. We had about 40 thousand architects and related design professionals, and about another 50 or 60 thousand people who were somewhat knowledgeable about architecture and building, but were not architects. The readership was very broad. One of the problems I had at *Architectural Forum* (and

later *Architecture Plus*) was that most of the people who contributed were architects or architectural historians who were basically illiterate. I mean they just couldn't write, they couldn't communicate. I don't know whom they communicated with. I think they communicated with each other. Sometimes Peter Eisenman would communicate with Ken Frampton, and Ken Frampton with Peter Eisenman. It was a rather small group, you see. My job really was to try and translate this verbiage into something that the average, reasonably well-educated reader could understand. The first thing you have to do when you're talking about architecture is to try and talk in a language that is reasonably widely understood — like English, for example — as opposed to the kind of language spoken at some of the academic institutions we're all familiar with. The next problem is that architectural journalism tends to fasten upon events, things, buildings when they are brand new. Yet how can you evaluate a building at that stage? Most critics, I've found, tend to look at architectural criticism in a way they might look at drama criticism or criticism of a painting or a sculpture. Once you see a thing or listen to a thing or see a performance of a play or listen to its music, it is the finished event. But a building is not finished at all when it's completed, it needs to be occupied, and it needs to be used, and it needs to be evaluated. And then, maybe five or ten years later, there is something that can be said about this building. There is no architectural criticism that really looks at buildings the way normal people — people who use them, people who live in them, work in them, live next door to them, look at them when they go to work — look at them. Most buildings are evaluated in purely aesthetic or art historical terms by critics who don't seem to be interested in the way buildings are used at all.

This is one of the areas in which there is a breakdown between a critic and his or her public. Magazines and newspapers are in the business of news. They must publish something the moment it's fresh and new and exciting and newsworthy; they're bored five minutes later. They are not interested in how a thing works. And architecture is, after all, only about 50 percent art, and perhaps 50 percent use, shelter, a place to live, a place to work. And that is where a division has developed between "public" architectural criticism — which is immensely interested in the use of a building and the way it



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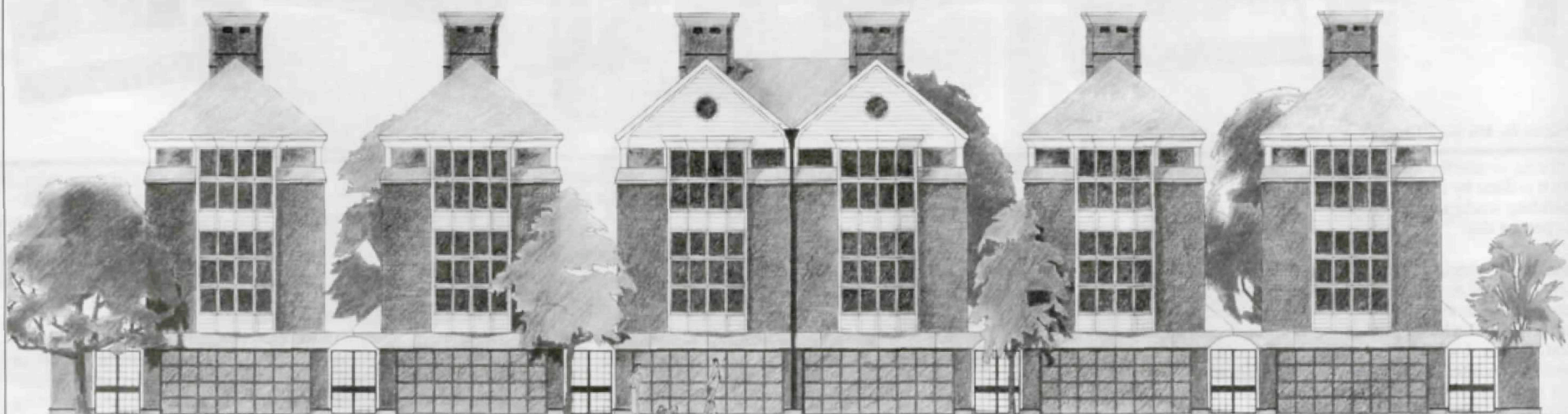
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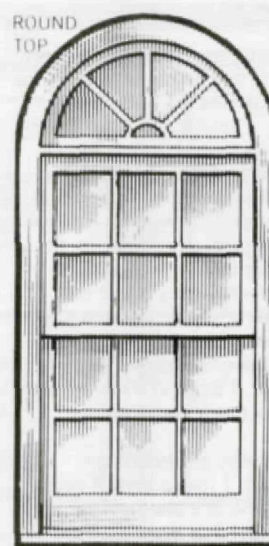
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performs — and the kind of criticism that most of us see — which is done by people who perhaps don't really care whether a building works or not. They just care about the way it looks on opening day.

**Ghirardo:** Although there is a place for reporting what's being built and for talking about the way a building looks in a particular environment, most architectural criticism evades the central issue of who's building what, where, and in whose interest. In fact, I would argue that all architectural criticism (or almost all architectural criticism) fails to ask who is building what and why. If you ask questions about the way a building looks, you can have infinite arguments; people will argue indefinitely about the formal qualities of the building. It's very easy to do that. It's very difficult to antagonize possible advertisers; it's very difficult to antagonize developers, real estate interests, or architects who turn around and say: "I have to put food on the table. If you criticize this project, I'm not going to get much business if you rake me over the coals." What we're avoiding is the responsibility of the critic to educate the public about the things that are being built and their impact on the community.

Changes in our urban environment over the last 30 or 40 years have not been positive, and many of them have gone unremarked and unrecognized until it's too late. In San Francisco, for example, the Embarcadero Freeway stops just beyond the Ferry Building, which used to be a major center. Now it's shoved off to one side of a freeway that ends in the middle of the air.

It's very difficult to undertake this kind of criticism; it's not popular. Newspaper editors immediately get calls asking "Who is this person you have writing for you who's saying these things." There is informal pressure from social contacts, pressure from advertisers, and finally from people who simply say "we'll sue if you print this." What the critics essentially do — I'm taking a fairly polemical position — is pander to those interests, pander to the unwillingness to confront the problems of buildings that are inhuman in scale, that disrupt functioning neighborhoods, that don't express human values.

**Papademetriou:** One of the issues we ought to touch on is the difference between the critic versus the reporter: the old dialectic between being a beacon to, or a mirror of, society's values.

**Giovannini:** Before going to the *New York Times*, I wrote for *The Herald Examiner* as the architectural critic and urban design critic in Los Angeles. For four years I found there, as I find in New York, that you have a couple of readerships: the lay readership and the professional readership. But in addition to that, you have the demands of the publication. I have written for a number of publications besides *The Herald Examiner* and the *Times*. I've written for *Architectural Digest* and *Skyline*, and within the *Times* I've written for the magazine, for the "Home Section," and for the "Arts and Leisure" pages, all of which are very different venues and have different requirements. I can bring the same perceptions to the same object, yet discuss them in five different ways.

From the point of view of a writer, it's very interesting to take a different posture and express myself in a different voice. One of the things I especially like to do is to discuss buildings as cultural artifacts in very broad terms. I am trained as an architect, I like to design, I am interested in formal issues, but I also like to write very broadly, to interpret the meaning of a building in a much fuller way. I think that a newspaper has a certain responsibility — as an institution of the city — to protect the city. As a critic you write in a protective capacity because it is *your* city and there's nobody else who's going to comment on it. At *The Herald Examiner*, I never once was reprimanded for taking a strong stand. It's quite possible that since the owners lived in San Francisco they didn't care what happened in Los Angeles, and had I been at *The Los Angeles Times* it might not have been the same. I think that the printed media have a certain reality and momentum that is unique.

To the extent that (especially in the glossy publications) architects do design for the photograph, I found myself occasionally thinking, "how would this look in a photograph; on a printed page?" and forgetting the fact that there's a built reality there as opposed to the photographic reality. For a lot of people there are two sites of a building — the printed page as well as the piece of land. I like writing for newsprint media because it de-emphasizes the photograph in favor of the printed word. I'm not saying that appearance is not important; it just shouldn't be dominant. In a publication like *Architectural Digest*, the gloss of the whole presentation is so dominant that the pictures set up a competitive relationship to the text.

**Papademetriou:** Another question is: Can newspapers sustain full-time criticism? When does a newspaper begin to dedicate a portion of its budget to the salary of an individual? It's an issue which at the moment is talked about here in Houston.

**Dillon:** I think newspapers tend to assess who's out there, who's reading. It's not necessarily a matter of numbers, it's a matter of influence. At times, a small but very powerful and influential constituency can be instrumental in making space available for architectural commentary if, in the opinion of the people who are running the paper, they matter. I don't think it's necessarily a numbers game, although that's important. Part of the way architects or people interested in architectural criticism sell that beat to a newspaper is to make it clear that there is a readership there that really counts.

**Papademetriou:** I wonder how journalists feel about architects calling-up and wanting to see more information on architecture in the newspaper?

**Holmes:** There have been people who've called me and said, "We would like to see a full-time architecture critic on *The Houston Chronicle*." I think that would be a fine idea too. Certainly Houston has a great deal of wonderful architecture. But we have not seen the need to have, every day, another article that would be critical.

I think that you have to evaluate that request. Is that some architect saying: "We would like to have a lot of publicity about our buildings?" Actually, if they get good criticism, it's not necessarily going to be positive. I'm not sure that the idea of full-time is the point. I think that the idea of dedicated criticism is the point. The question is: how do you cover it? It's not enough just to "cover" it. I think it's fine to say, "Let's cover the arts with the same gusto, the same energy, and the same questioning that you would a fire, or a murder, or something." But evaluative things are a different story, and I think that newspapers in cities where a lot is happening architecturally have to keep up with it and provide provocative conversation to educate the public about what they're seeing, to give a point of view.

I have to say this: It's a very dangerous world out there. It's perfectly nice to say, "Yes, we want architectural criticism." When you start criticizing private enterprise, you could criticize a man's building just about as easily as the way that Bobby Sakowitz runs his store. It's not welcome, and you've got to be very careful about the way you do that.

**Dillon:** But doesn't that just throw it back on how responsible the paper is in covering its own city? Architecture is the biggest on-going story in Houston. It has been for ten years. I just came back from Albuquerque, and Albuquerque has a full-time architecture critic. And there's nothing going on down there.

**Ghirardo:** I find it distressing when advertisers say "We don't want to advertise with you because we don't like what you write." I find it distressing that the architectural community itself cannot sustain this kind of criticism. But, more importantly, I don't think that the architect is the only guilty party in these things. The people who should be talked about are the developers — what they're doing, and how. The function of criticism is to encourage people to question not just the way something looks from the outside but the basic assumptions. I was appalled when I came to Houston; I didn't understand it the first time. I drove around and there was nobody on the streets. This was downtown Houston, and you didn't see a soul. I wondered what had happened. I found out later that everyone is below the ground or in these walkways which, because of my car, I somehow didn't notice. I recognize that there are issues of climate here, but I wonder where the center of Houston is. If it's in buildings downtown, it certainly isn't the center after 6:00 PM, and I don't know what kind of center it is during the day. But there are some serious questions that have to be asked about the environment here, and just because Philip Johnson comes in and drops another one of his buildings down doesn't mean that good things are happening in Houston.

**Papademetriou:** How does the public begin to influence the media to produce good criticism?

**Giovannini:** Could I pick up on the thread of danger in the conversation. The word "criticism" has certain connotations. To me it seems that the way of addressing the issues that have been raised is to discuss the building as an artifact, the impact of the artifact on the city, and then conclude this-way or that-way. A critic should not support a faction. You're not in the business of interested parties, you're really impartial. Perhaps this is a bit naïve of me. But I should think that any builder or architect who's reasonable will accept even negative remarks if they make sense and are reasonably presented, without ad hominem comments, I think the discussion itself can carry the issue. I don't think there's any reason not to confront an issue. You diffuse the aura of danger simply by being reasonable and fair.

**Ghirardo:** I want to make an argument for sometimes being unreasonable in criticism. If I write an article talking about some particular issue of relevance in a community, I don't have the money, or the influence, or the kind of power to push through something beyond criticism. Sometimes, if you write an "unreasonable" article or a very strong, polemically charged article, you're more likely to get the public involved. Architecture is a public issue and too many things slip through to completion without public involvement. How do you get the public involved? Well, you have to inform them. And, frequently, you have to tell them what the biggest negatives are, and that may be when they stand up.

**Blake:** I'd like to add something to this. Jane Jacobs — who worked with me on *Architectural Forum* — was one of those critics, one who's a very activist kind of person. She not only wrote (and wrote very persuasively) but got involved and stopped things from happening. There were some idiots in New York who wanted to build a 12-lane highway through lower Manhattan. She wrote against it, agitated against it, testified against it, and finally stopped it. Without Jane's intervention, all of what we now call SoHo — which is probably the most successful spontaneously developed area of New York or any other city in this country since World War II — would have been destroyed by that expressway. She stopped it. She was a critic who got involved. She became an activist.

It seems to me that there is room for that kind of an activist, muckraking columnist who would confront *this* city, which I've seen now for about the sixth or seventh time. I think it is a dreadful city, and I regret to have to say this. It's a curious thing that none of the newspapers, none of the critics, say this in Houston. I think if Jane Jacobs or Lewis Mumford had been writing a column, these issues would have been brought out into the open. There would have been leadership exerted by the press to agitate, to stop, certain things — to stop this business of incredible concentrations of megabucks in glass boxes, with people compressed into tunnels below the earth. Somebody might have stopped this incredible city from happening. This is a city where, in fact, the neutron bomb already has been dropped. The only thing left are these megabuck 80-story glass boxes. Isn't there anyone here who talks about these things? Why don't newspapers take leadership in this kind of situation? Why don't the architects speak up?

**Papademetriou:** Well, I guess one of the questions is, who owns the newspapers?

**Blake:** It's a very good question.

**Lewis:** One thing we haven't addressed is the audience of a newspaper. The readers' average educational age is tenth grade, and I was told recently that it may have dropped to eighth grade. I try not to write down to that level, but when I'm reporting I have to remember that not everybody knows architectural jargon. If you write architectural jargon most people aren't going to read it.

**Ghirardo:** Architects ought to realize that their interests aren't served by pandering constantly to the same economic interests. I know that architects have to put food on the table, and I know that sometimes you don't get to build a building the way you'd like to because you have to meet the expectations of a client. A poet doesn't have to do that nor does a painter; even somebody who writes books doesn't have to do that. But an architect does. I know that's a problem. But it would be in architects' interests to support publications which do take on precisely those kinds of issues. Then you would have more clout behind you when you say to a developer, "Look, another 70-story building just isn't going to work here. All these other people in the community are saying the same kind of thing too. Let's think about alternative solutions." The Rice Design Alliance and *Cite* ought to be supported. The newspapers ought to be supported in encouraging a very vocal and activist criticism. And architects ought to support it, even if it hurts them sometimes, because in the end it helps.

**Dillon:** I think it's important to remember — particularly in Houston, certainly in Dallas — that architecture is news. In a city like Houston, a city like Dallas, it is one of the biggest on-going stories in town. Sometimes the way that you sell criticism is by not using the word at all. You sell the news value of a building, and I don't mean real estate. I was not hired because my editors were particularly interested in architecture. They were like the average layman: they didn't have a clue why architects did what they did or why buildings looked the way they did. But they recognized a story when they saw it, and that was a kind of leverage. I think that even though we've talked about criticism and not about news, it's very important to keep this issue in mind. Architecture is as important as the school board meeting, it's as important as the city council meeting, it's as important as the public works. And that counts. It's not criticism, but it counts. I think it's a mistake to forget that.

**Blake:** There is an aspect of architectural criticism which seems to me fairly important: the incredible need for news. The voracious appetite of newspapers and magazines for something new — all the time, every day, every week — has created a very different situation for architecture in America in the last few years. There are architects practicing today who have never built anything at all, yet their drawings become as important as if the building in fact existed. The magazines and newspapers need news so badly that an outrageous project on paper (which will never be built, for which there is no client, nothing) will hit the front pages and the covers because the need for news is there.

There is a further aspect to this, which is detrimental to the development of architecture. In one of his pieces at the end of 1983 about the architecture of the preceding year, Paul Goldberger said that he wasn't going to mention the AT&T Building because so much had already been said about it. Well, of course, particularly by him. In fact, the building is barely occupied. I don't know whether you're aware of this, because the building has been written about for the past six years as if it were a reality. When I was in Cambridge three or four weeks ago, I assumed that Jim Stirling's addition to the Fogg Museum was built and occupied because everybody — Ada Louise Huxtable, Paul Goldberger — had written about it. Well, it's not built at all. It is a 50-percent completed building. It may or may not work; it may or may not look like Hell. Nobody is in any position to say anything about it at all. But by the time it gets finished it will be old hat and no one will report on it at all. I suspect this has a very detrimental effect on the development of architecture which many of us would rather not discuss, because we're in favor of having more architectural criticism, not less. This desperate need for news has shaped the direction of architecture in this country for the past 10 or 15 years, and not always in the way that I would have liked to see it.