

Critics on Criticism

The Role of the Press/Criticism in Architecture

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.

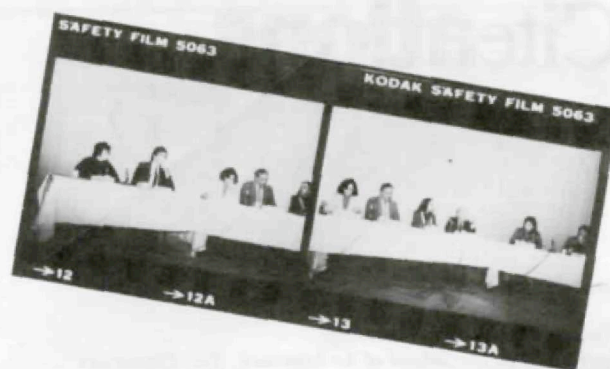
In summing up her talk, Stephens outlined the questions she

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?

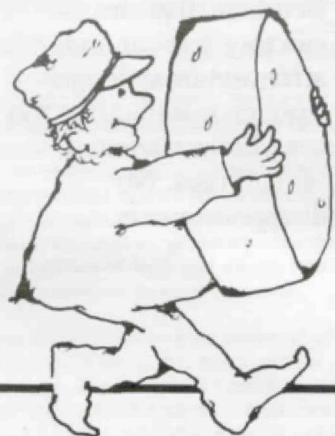
Blake: When I was the editor of *Architectural Forum*, we initially belonged to Time-Life. Time, Inc. believed in big circulation. We had about 40 thousand architects and related design professionals, and about another 50 or 60 thousand people who were somewhat knowledgeable about architecture and building,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



(Photos by Michael Thomas)

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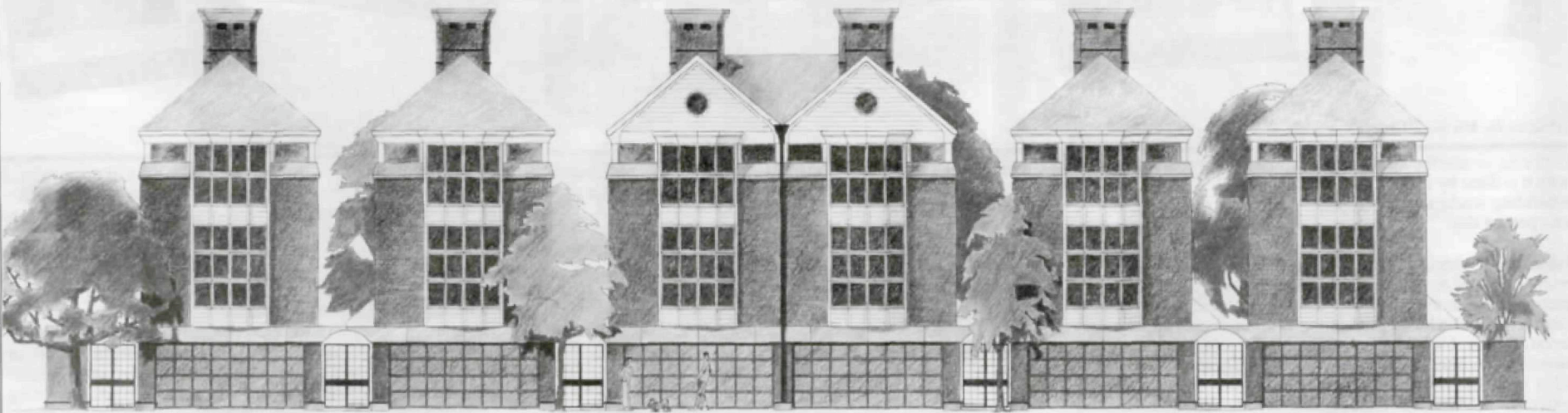
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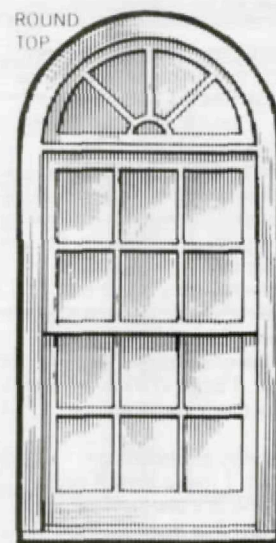
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performs — and the kind of criticism that most of us see — which is done by people who perhaps don't really care whether a building works or not. They just care about the way it looks on opening day.

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 dominating 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 naive 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.