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Places

Title

On Criticism in the Profession [Criticism of Place: A Symposium]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zc357x9>

Journal

Places, 4(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1987-04-01

Peer reviewed

On Criticism in the Profession

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In a more lurid journal, this piece might be called “Confessions of a Critic.” For I write not as a theorist of criticism but as a practitioner.

I came to be a critic, not through sadism or a special drive to be judgmental, but as an extension of my function as a journalist. My particular approach to architectural journalism is experiential. That is, I believe the core function of an architectural magazine of the kind I have edited is to convey the experience of works of architecture through a combination of words and illustrations.

Since that experience is seldom, if ever, totally positive, I am thrust into the role of critic simply to be true to my readers.

The other papers pay some attention to the purpose of criticism. To me it is simply an extension of the magazine’s function of informing its readers as to what is happening in the built work so that they can learn from it (perhaps even borrow from it). As much can be learned from shortcomings as successes, if suitably analyzed.

Criticism intended to influence rather than inform the reader—to advance a particular style or theory or individual—to me is simply bad journalism. However, it is possible to hope that one’s criticism can carry some broad exhortations, to pay more than lip service to context and user needs, for example.

Before going on to the subject of applying criticism to subjects larger

than single buildings, I would like to make a case that criticism need not be a one-shot exercise but can be applied to works of architecture profitably at various points in their lives. At the project stage, when a design is first unveiled, it is possible to discuss critically its compositional aspects and any messages the architect may mean to convey. It is also possible at this stage to look for the position of this particular work in the designer’s corpus, to assess whether it marks any kind of departure in the architect’s approach or perhaps a confirmation of earlier directions and predilections.

Upon completion comes the time to be experiential. It is important here to give the work its due. It must be shown sufficiently so that the reader can form his or her own impression and make an independent judgment. It must be described as well as characterized.

At this stage also one can begin holding the work up against the needs of the client and intentions of the designer. And one can deal with the crucial matter of fit to context.

However, only by returning to the work after some years of use can the critic make a valid judgment of how well it has treated its users and surroundings and how durable a construction and creation it has turned out to be.

In this respect, as in most others, criticism of places is much like criticism of buildings. For purposes of this discussion as I understand it,

the term “places” is defined as environments larger than single buildings, made up of open spaces as well as buildings. Among those to which I have applied criticism have been multibuilding complexes, college campuses, whole new communities, and precincts of cities.

In doing so, the emphasis must be on the ensemble. Individual buildings become building blocks in construction of the larger environment. They can be dealt with separately along the way, but they must be dealt with mainly as they relate to one another and the external spaces they help shape. Facades are judged, not just as compositions in themselves, but as walls of these spaces.

I have found that this affects the pace of the research and observation that goes into criticism of places. On the one hand, they need to be experienced over time, since nature affects their use more than it does a protected interior environment, and the users themselves are more diverse and unpredictable, changing with time. On the other hand, some of the observation must be done at a fast pace—in one gulp, as it were. This is necessary to get a sense of the whole, with minimum distraction by the parts. In 1976 I did a fifteenth anniversary assessment of the results of the Bacon plan for Center City Philadelphia. In large part it was drawn from multiple visits to the city over a period of years. But a crucial element—a sense of how the pieces of the plan, the individual developments that resulted from it, fit

together—came mainly from a swift, single day’s tour.

A related factor is altitude. Much of the experience of a place must be garnered from the ground. But it is also valuable to view it from above. I have found the helicopter to be a first-rate tool of urban design criticism. And my favorite way of illustrating such criticism is with helicopter-level photos.

It is often difficult in criticism of places to measure them against original intent. There is seldom, as is usually the case with individual buildings, a clear-cut program or a single designer. Urban places grow by accretion under an endless multiplicity of influences, notably the vagaries of real estate economics. Most often the only things resembling a design are a generalized land use plan and a loose framework of development regulations. Still, it can be instructive to trace the people and forces who had major roles in making a place what it is and to bring under criticism the processes of urban development as well as their products.