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## Places

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# On Criticism

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Before discussing specific categories and techniques relevant to the analysis of public places as opposed to individual buildings, we first need to consider the following question: do we write criticism to explain or elucidate the built environment, or do we write it for explicitly instrumental or operative purposes, that is, to change the built environment? The differences between explanatory and operative criticism are not always clear-cut, for even when we are attempting to be most objective we apply values and assumptions that color the methods and conclusions of our analysis. Also, paradoxically, the seemingly most objective analysis can serve political goals.

Closely linked to this problem of critical objective is a second question: should criticism deal with the object of analysis as a static event, frozen in time, or should it consider the object *in* time, how it came to be? In linguistic terms, this is the choice between a synchronic and a diachronic approach.

### Explanatory Criticism

Most professional literary criticism is explanatory. The traditional goal of literary criticism, whether the now old New Criticism or recent structuralist and poststructuralist approaches is to explain or interpret a work of art—though admittedly differing components of that work—to a more general audience. Most academic critics refrain from any pretense of shaping literary currents; indeed objectivity or truth was the purported claim until

poststructuralists challenged the value itself.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of Marxist critics, notably George Lukacs and the Frankfurt School before World War II and, more recently, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, and Terry Eagleton, most criticism in literature has been synchronic—dealing with one moment in time—and self-consciously so. Both New Criticism and structuralist approaches emphasize analysis of the text itself. These methods bracket out issues of artistic intentionality, social conditions, and economic parameters unless these are revealed in the operation of the literary work. We would say that New Criticism asks what a text means and structuralism asks how it means; but both, like poststructuralism, refrain from asking why it is what it is or how it came to be. The issue of causality, that is, historical evolution, is ignored.

Architecture, in contrast, has rarely been approached synchronically. The closest example that I can find in architectural writing parallel to the analyses of New Criticism is the writing of Colin Rowe, particularly his essay “Mathematics of the Ideal Villa.”<sup>2</sup> Structuralism and semiology, the study of signs, have had, of course, their advocates in architecture, but despite Charles Jencks’s two books, more has been written about semiological procedures than about the way buildings actually signify.<sup>3</sup> Synchronic analyses of public spaces—whether formalist or semiological—are even rarer.

Thus, it seems that if there is to be an explanatory criticism of architecture, it would have to be largely diachronic rather than synchronic, that is, dealing with the evolution of the object rather than considering it as a fixed event. This, in fact, has been the more typical mode of architectural criticism—history—up to now. Given the complex weave of social, economic, and technical issues involved in the production of any large-scale building, the isolation of formal dimensions in architecture apart from historical conditions is virtually impossible. In contrast to writers and artists, architects ordinarily need clients to create, and their ties to the market are consequently more direct. In addition, as Alan Colquhoun has pointed out, the nature of architectural meaning itself demands a consciousness of the historical situation and an awareness of change.<sup>4</sup> Unlike written language, in which there is an assumption of a universal lexicon and a general consensus as to meaning at any one moment in time,<sup>5</sup> architectural form necessitates a conception of meaning that is highly ambivalent, continually changing, and closely linked to context.

### Operative Criticism

In brief, operative criticism attempts to affect, not simply to explain, the evolution of architecture. Manfredo Tafuri offers a more complete definition in *Theories and History of Architecture*:

What is normally meant by *operative criticism* is an analysis

of architecture (or of the arts in general) that, instead of an abstract survey, has as its objective the planning of a precise poetical tendency, anticipated in its structures and derived from historical analyses programmatically distorted and finalized.

By this definition operative criticism represents the meeting point of history and planning. We could say, in fact, that operative criticism *plans* past history by projecting it towards the future. Its verifiability does not require abstractions of principle, it measures itself, each time, against the results obtained, while its theoretical horizon is the pragmatist and instrumental tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Most architectural criticism, probably due to the numbers of architects working as critics and the close dependence of critics on architects (for drawings, access to private homes, interior photographs, etc.), has been operative. One thinks of the works of the great Enlightenment theorists J. F. Blondel, Laugier, Lodoli, Quatremère de Quincy; of the Gothic revivalists Pugin, Ruskin, Morris; of the first generation of modern movement historians Sigfried Giedion, N. Pevsner, Alberto Sartoris; and even of contemporary architectural polemicists Robert Venturi, Aldo Rossi, Rob Krier, and Maurice Culot.

Tafari's definition of operative criticism implies a selective historical—diachronic—account of architecture, whose stages of evolution make the historian's desired development the next logi-

cal step. I would propose instead that operative criticism might be either synchronic or diachronic, although blurrings of method are common in this committed approach. Operative synchronic criticism establishes general criteria for design and judgment; it seeks results not through a selective historical lineage but through standards of “good” and “bad” architecture.

Synchronic operative criticism includes Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction*, a committed translation of New Criticism to architecture (what Pellegrino d'Acierno aptly calls *Learning from T. S. Eliot*) and Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City*, which leans heavily on structuralist methods for the concept of type.<sup>7</sup> Operative diachronic accounts include not only the modern movement classics *Space, Time and Architecture* and *Pioneers of Modern Design* but also recent books as divergent as Alberto Pérez-Gómez's phenomenological tract *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* and Charles Jencks's postmodern apologies *Post-modern Classicism: The New Synthesis* and *Architecture Today*. Undoubtedly, much operative criticism has had a powerful role in shaping architectural history. Whether current approaches can continue to shape architectural history, and whether the nature of their impact is desirable, is more problematic.

#### Explanatory Criticism of Places

Just as any explanatory criticism of architecture appears to require a

diachronic rather than synchronic approach, any analysis that attempts to elucidate the nature of a place seems to necessitate a consideration of historical forces. But the generating factors, of course, vary from an individually designed building to a public place. One of the most overt differences is the role of artistic intentionality, as opposed to general cultural, social, and economic forces in determining form. Historical accounts of single buildings ordinarily discuss the architect's intentions, earlier designs, and career trajectory in order to establish the parameters that led to a design. While personal motivations are often balanced by social and economic contingencies, the monographic approach generally stresses biographical considerations (in my opinion too much). In the criticism of public places, the balance is inevitably reversed. Tax laws, zoning laws, and neighborhood patterns typically play a stronger role in explaining the nature of a place and its evolution in time than the intentions of any one designer. Indeed, the historian/critic of public places is forced to go beyond conscious generating dimensions to less conscious political and social relations in trying to establish causality or governing structures. For instance, while the design of sidewalks, buildings, or even the overall massing of urban blocks might be attributed to tax incentives, zoning regulations, or a specific designer's intention, the way the various components of an urban fabric join or form a whole may seem to be circumstantial. To begin to understand the connections be-

tween the parts requires not only a historical perspective but one that looks beyond overt, localized motivations to the relations between institutions and productive processes themselves.

### Operative Criticism of Places

Operative criticism of a public place also differs from operative criticism of an individual building. The latter seeks either to rally support for an architect's work or a particular design tendency or to condemn that work or design tendency in the hopes of suppressing a form of practice either in the architect himself or herself or in other practitioners. Most current architectural journalism falls in this category. In contrast, operative criticism of a public place, like explanatory criticism of a public place, cannot so readily focus on individual styles and schools, but instead must confront the broader range of issues already mentioned—building practices, zoning legislation, urban institutions—cultural and productive relations in their most encompassing sense. The question of impact is one of motivating institutional, not individual, reform. Influence becomes a more difficult, and inherently more political, issue.

This raises the problem, referred to earlier, whether written instrumental criticism in the sense of

Giedion's and Pevsner's histories is presently effective in the context of improving the public realm. If action is the goal, would other, more varied approaches—journalism with more critical imagery, television documentaries, testimony at public hearings, alternative zoning proposals—be more effective critical strategies for generating change? At this point few individuals believe histories that are overtly polemical sufficiently to act on their proposed belief structures. Instead, more direct operative moves, involving a larger audience and a more direct relation to productive processes, may be the only effective means to begin, in Tafuri's phrase, "planning history."

Finally, I would like to return to my original question about whether criticism should be explanatory or instrumental. While I believe that there is room for criticism of action, I would strongly affirm the need for criticism as elucidation/history. Operative strategies will always remain of a reformist, piecemeal nature unless they are also informed by a broader understanding of architecture in relation to global economic, social, and cultural forces. While there may be no absolute historical truth, only a striving for such an understanding can offer us, I believe, effective grounds for more immediate, pragmatic, operative responses.

### NOTES

- 1 Deconstruction questions the assumption that there is a fundamental meaning or truth to a text. Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* proposes that not only is language a product *différance*, distinctive oppositions, but that meaning is always *deferred*. For an introduction to deconstruction, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) and Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).
- 2 Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976), pp. 1–27.
- 3 Two books that explore how semiology might be applied to architectural criticism are Geoffrey Broadbent, Richard Bunt, and Charles Jencks, eds. *Signs, Symbols and Architecture* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980); and George Baird and Charles Jencks, eds. *Meaning in Architecture* (New York: Braziller, 1969).
- 4 Alan Colquhoun, "Historicism and the Limits of Semiology," in Alan Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), pp. 129–51.
- 5 Recently, semiologists and linguists have challenged this notion of meaning as well, stressing the unstable nature of meaning and its endless displacement.
- 6 Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 141.
- 7 In *Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1982). Aldo Rossi never attempts to reconcile his concept of type, as a constant, with his Marxist analysis of economic transformations.