



Conundra attempts to sort out complex built-environment-related issues.

CONUNDRRA

Architectural criticism is on life support. What, if anything, can be done to revive it?

BY CAMILLE LEFEVRE

So the old adage “Everyone’s a critic” has turned out to be true. Sort of. We know the situation all too well: With the decline of print media, especially newspapers, which have largely jettisoned their professional arts and architecture critics, coupled with the rise of the Internet and its bloggers and tweeters, the landscape of arts journalism, including architectural criticism, is shifting to cyberspace.

For many electronic magazines, aggregation is the buzzword as websites such as ArchNewsNow combine some original content with articles gleaned and information compiled from other sites around the globe. Meanwhile, online publishing and social-media platforms such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook have democratized and empowered the populace to say what they think, whenever they think it, to whoever wishes to read it.

Perhaps, instead of “Everyone’s a critic,” the adage should now be “Everyone’s got an opinion,” because professional criticism and unsolicited opinion are not the same. As an arts journalist, I never hesitate to qualify my criticism: This is my point of view, one point of view. Everyone else is entitled to his or her point of view as well. In fact, no one experiences the same performance/art exhibition/architect-designed building in the same way or through the same lens.

Still, as I explain to my architecture-writing and arts-journalism students, it’s not enough to simply post an opinion: “I loved it” or “It stank.” What purpose does that serve? It certainly doesn’t further critical discourse (which print media instigated, once upon a time) on buildings and issues that still deserve public input. As Trevor Boddy lamented in “The Conundrums of Architectural Criticism” in the spring 2009 issue of *Arcade* magazine, “Oh bloggers—we had hoped you would lead the charge in the next critical wars—but why is so much of what you write uninformed, reactive, cranky, and, worst of all, dull?” Criticism,

on the other hand, is an art and craft that requires well-developed skills in critical observation, critical thinking, and critical writing, in addition to an understanding of context and a rhetorical flair for description, interpretation, and evaluation.

Academia may seem the logical place for this training to occur. But emerging and experienced critics acquire such expertise largely through ongoing (and often independent) study and practice. With hard work, some talent, and some luck, critics can rise above the cyber-chatter of opinionating. But once they have cleared that hurdle, there are more, including finding a place to publish their criticism and getting paid for their work.

Where are the others who are able and willing to rise from the flattened world of cyber-opinion to undertake the project of architectural criticism?

The Internet, founded as a free—and free-for-all—source of news and information, has been embraced by most of the population. But with a few exceptions, online publications haven’t yet acquired the funding, paying subscribers, or ad revenue to financially compensate professional critics. Factor in the ongoing economic slump—in which almost an entire generation of architects is out of work, with countless architectural projects on hold or off the boards—and the prospects for critical public discussion continue to be grim.

When print media began its decline in quality of content and quantity of coverage, its first line of financial defense was to eject most of its art critics and arts coverage—principally those established critics with a deep understanding

of their discipline and of the arts community and/or built environment in which they worked. Longtime critics who retired, or those who chose to leave, were not replaced.

The demographic that still buys newspapers and magazines cried foul. But their voices and their purchasing power are diminishing. In a speech to an American Institute of Architects gathering in 2008, David Dillon, former architecture critic for the *Dallas Morning News* (he took a buyout and wasn’t replaced), affirmed the historical influence of print and the long-held power of the critic. He described the demise of architecture critics as “disastrous, because newspaper critics are the front line of architecture coverage, always more timely and often more comprehensive than the design magazines.”

“Newspapers are where the public gets most of its architectural information, as well as most of its information about planning, community development, neighborhood preservation, and other matters that it cares about,” Dillon continued. “Online sources can’t begin to plug this gap, which means that conversation has virtually stopped on most of these critical issues. Dialogue and debate have given way to deafening silence.”

The silencing of newspaper critics, especially around issues of architecture, urbanism, preservation, and design in Minnesota, is irrefutable. Neither of the Twin Cities’ metropolitan newspapers covers architecture anymore. Our state’s design magazine, *Architecture Minnesota*, is a publication of the American Institute of Architects Minnesota, with a scope limited to a degree by its mission to showcase the work of AIA Minnesota architects. And the theoretical exertions in academic journals don’t always appeal to or engage a public audience.

In “Making Criticism More Critical” in a recent issue of *Journal of Architectural Education*, Thomas Fisher, Assoc. AIA, dean of the University of

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Minnesota College of Design and onetime editorial director of the now-defunct *Progressive Architecture* magazine, discusses how the latter two examples “present a real problem for our profession. Those who use the architectural press mainly for PR purposes create a public perception of our profession as one more interested in promoting ourselves than in looking after the public good. Meanwhile, the obscurity of so much academic writing underscores the fact that we have largely walked away from our role as public intellectuals.”

I can think of one local exception. In 2008, the Gen X- and Gen Y-oriented *Metro* magazine dismissed its arts critics but continued its architecture column by architect Phillip Koski, AIA. While that decision may have caused some observers to scratch their heads, it was undoubtedly due in part to Koski’s singular writing style. He infuses his articles about places, issues (such as historic preservation), and buildings with a hipster cachet backed up by an authentic understanding of context (historical, cultural, material), an intelligence gained through architectural education and practice, and a keen rhetorical desire—and ability—to enlighten and entertain his readers.

For now, Koski’s our primary architecture critic as public intellectual. Where are the others who are able and willing to rise from the flattened world of cyber-opinion to undertake the project of architectural criticism? Will they work out of a sense of mission, for little pay and less acclaim? Will new public-discourse platforms instigated by emerging and experienced professional architecture critics arise to fill the void? Will readers—particularly architects—find, support, and engage these online publications and their critics? Such are the conundra facing architectural criticism today. **AMN**

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