Post-truth architecture

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Buildings may be constructed on the building site, but architecture is constructed in the discourse

It’s official: ‘post-truth’ is the word of 2016. Oxford Dictionaries, which decides the annual accolade, defines it as ‘denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. It adds that the term was first used in 1992 of the Iran-Contra scandal, however it is only in the context of this year’s Brexit and Trump campaigns that it has become common parlance.

It could be argued that the media themselves are responsible for the rise of post-truth with their portrayal of fabricated, unachievable images and worlds. In 1991, Jean Baudrillard famously claimed that the Gulf War did not take place – that its media representation supplanted the horrors of the reality on the ground. And since then, increasing computer power has allowed three things to happen: first, images can be created that look not only convincingly real, but in the words of Bono, ‘even better than the real thing’ (take, for example, the incredible images of Filip Dujardin); second, near-instant manipulation and communication of those images is possible, as with the faked fireworks broadcast live during the 2008 Beijing Olympics – Instagram has replaced Archigram; third, our constant connection to screens means that we tend to actually prefer inhabiting representations of the world. What place does criticism have in an era populated by post-humans with Social Media Behaviour Disorders? Perhaps we need a new type of criticism to fit our current situation. Reliable, trustworthy, honest critique is more vital than ever, and islands – maybe even archipelagos – of authority can still be found upon which to establish a reasoned debate that is accountable and challengeable.
Architectural criticism has long moved with its targets. The cause championed by the earliest magazines in the 19th century was to define the architectural profession as distinct and autonomous from others with competing interests in the construction industry; aesthetics were considered that which could distinguish architects from surveyors, contractors and, in particular, engineers. In the 1920s, the aim of criticism was to educate members of the public so that they would be able to distinguish between good and bad architecture – presumably to encourage them to demand the former. *The Architectural Review for the Artist and Craftsman* (to give its full title), founded in 1896, was very much an Arts and Crafts paper. Its form of criticism was to promote the good and ignore the bad – a policy that endured long into the 20th century, albeit generally unspoken – echoing Ernesto Nathan Rogers’ statement that ‘there is no such thing as bad architecture; only good architecture and non-architecture’. Throughout the history of the architectural press, this is the most common form of criticism. It uses publication to bestow legitimacy on a few chosen buildings, and is perhaps the most opaque and mysterious form of validation as the selection process simply depends on the editor’s authority and taste.
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In 1948, Hugh Casson presented a talk at the Architectural Association entitled ‘100 Years of Type-Set Architecture’, in which he stated that the architectural press was often accused of being uncritical; he responded that this was the case ‘because of the law of libel and because they were loyal to architecture’. John Summerson replied that ‘those architects who were anxious to have criticism were the ones who did not design anything; those who designed did not want it […] Criticism might be useful at the designing stage but it was no use criticising when the building was up’. This of course, misses the wider context of criticism’s role in the construction of a discourse surrounding architecture that people such as Barthes, Bourdieu, Colomina and Rattenbury would go on to argue actually produces architecture.

Form 14 by Josef Schulz

Form 14 by Josef Schulz – Stripped of just a few elements, such as lettering, mundane architecture can reveal an uncanny elegance

The fault-finding type of criticism, the kind no one wants, relates only to evaluation. Seen as negative and injurious, it is the most pervasive and popular definition of criticism, the kind of which Martin Pawley lamented the apparent passing in ‘The Strange Death of Architectural Criticism’, published in The Architects’ Journal in 1998. There he called for an end to ‘the cosy arrangement whereby more and more architectural magazines and vanity-published monographs clog letterboxes and bookshops with digitally cleansed images and wall-to-wall testimonials of praise’. We can only imagine what he would have made of Dezeen or ArchDaily.
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It is true that criticism can gush too far into the positive and this is problematic for two reasons. First, if the media is simply used as a conduit for architects’ PR, and the text is ‘Photoshopped’ as much as the images, then, at best, it is disengaged sycophancy and, at worst, free advertising. It may offer description and facts, but no insight or interpretation and will clearly be partial in both senses of the word, on the verge of becoming post-truth. Second, while critics can’t help but have their own favourites, the criticism can risk becoming too attached to a particular ideology or approach. Manfredo Tafuri famously lambasted this as ‘operative criticism’, whereby critics essentially operate as architects by constructing and selling an architectural project themselves, albeit on the page.

‘Façades’ series by Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy

‘Façades’ series by Zacharie Gaudrillot-Roy – The detritus of city life transforms the surreal into the everyday
In particular, Tafuri had the art historian and member of the AR editorial team Nikolaus Pevsner in mind. Pevsner started contributing regularly to the AR from 1936, the year his *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* was published. This book imagined a teleology from William Morris to Walter Gropius as the inevitable and unquestioned destiny of architecture, and the AR similarly promoted modern ‘International Style’ architecture. Critics and historians like Pevsner were instrumental in providing the propaganda – both to architects and the general public – that Modern architecture needed, after the war, to become the *de facto* style in the reconstruction effort. To an extent, the AR maintained this position into the 1980s, politely dismissing Postmodernism as it would an uninvited relative at a funeral, and instead focusing on the growing reputations of the High-Tech boys.

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‘Judgemental’ criticism doesn’t just come from architectural critics. Having been almost entirely absent from the mainstream press for decades, Prince Charles’s infamous carbuncle speech at the 150th anniversary of the RIBA in 1984 successfully put architecture in the headlines, and even on television. Finally the profession had a willing audience but, much to its chagrin, the prince had tapped into the public’s mistrust of architects and gave the uneducated masses licence to say what they thought. This was architectural criticism looking through the wrong end of the telescope.

Prada Marfa, 2005, by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset

*Source: Photograph by Efrain Padro (Alamy)*
Prada Marfa, 2005, by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset – So accustomed are we to image manipulation, all photographs are met with scepticism

When done with aplomb, the kind of articulate lashing Pawley desired can be entertaining and even insightful. In fact, it’s quite fashionable these days and has become prime-time entertainment, as wannabes from bakers to singers prostrate themselves before a panel of experts, nodding in surrender at the authoritative demolition of their labours. I can’t help wondering whether an architectural crit would make equally compelling viewing; whether we would be outraged or shrink into our armchairs in awkward empathy. After all, every architect has endured the time-honoured ritual of being broken in through a semi-public critique of their work. Criticism is embedded in us all: it is part of our habitus. But Pawley also claimed that in architecture, ‘criticism may be as futile as trying to make a car go faster with a whip’. While a sour review can ruin a restaurant or lead to a show’s premature end, seething architectural criticism can have no effect on the \textit{fait accompli} that is the building.

‘A demolition job on paper may not trigger actual demolition on site but it can, at least, hold the architect to account in the name of architecture’

A demolition job on paper may not trigger actual demolition on site but it can, at least, hold the architect to account in the name of architecture. Critics have for years been complaining of a crisis in all forms of cultural critique and its complicity with, rather than resistance to, neoliberalism and corporatism. Frederic Jameson argued that culture had become a commodity in its own right, and that the cause of architecture had turned away from constructing utopia to self-promotion through the winning of awards, with critics forming the judging panel. This, however, assumes that only ‘fault-finding’ criticism counts as good criticism – but positive criticism, or approval, needs to have an equal place: we need to dream in Delight as much as we tut in Outrage. Criticism would certainly be in crisis if we only focused on the negative, as the AR sometimes did in its ‘golden age’, with contributors such as Reyner Banham, Ian Nairn, Gordon Cullen, Pevsner and JM Richards seemingly stuck in excoriation mode as they confronted what now appears a golden age of building. Perhaps the two phenomena were not unconnected.
Daily #15 by Thomas Demand

Source: Courtesy of VG Bild-Kunst/DACS/Sprüth Magers

Daily #15 by Thomas Demand – The reconstruction of moments of shared reality leads us to reconsider our physical surroundings
Looking to the future, the biggest challenge for architectural criticism is, without doubt, the internet – where instantaneity is valued over longevity, and image over consideration; where misunderstanding is more common than understanding, and where readers expect something (usually instant gratification) for nothing. Everyone apparently becomes a critic online, but real authority is difficult to establish. A new network of reputation, or ‘critical capital’, can emerge from the cacophony though, and it’s the job of institutions like magazines to stake out a recognisable position in order to legitimise writers, just as it was in the printed world – the two are certainly not mutually exclusive. This position will live or die on both its reputation, and on readers’ willingness to pay for quality discourse above a Twitter storm. As editor of Building Design, Pawley himself would famously ask a journalist to fit a story to a headline. Lazy complicity does exist, but so does rigorous resistance, and it has ever been thus.

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From PR self-promotion to hyperrealistic renders and the use of Photoshop, architecture itself is not immune to post-truth. Whether on the internet or in a printed publication, critics and the publications they serve need to represent a datum of authority, or ‘truthiness’. Casson rightly pointed out that ‘architects got the journalism they deserve’. The profession needs strong criticism to thrive: architecture and its architects need external interpretation, analysis, critique, validation and to be held to account. Buildings may be constructed on the building site, but architecture is constructed in the discourse.