



Constructivism and Beyond. David Wild. (Courtesy of the artist.)

On the Role of Architectural Criticism Today

MICHAEL BENEDIKT
University of Texas, Austin

Let's start with the obvious: architectural criticism takes different forms as it addresses different audiences. Compare a page in *JAE* to a page in *Architectural Record* to a page in *Dwell* or the *Chicago Tribune*. Consider also the criticism that flowers at school reviews—the jousting, the *ad hominem* remarks repurposed to refer to buildings . . . a “discourse,” in all, that moulds the souls of future architects while raising (or sinking) the stock of young professors—and one wonders what could possibly be said in eight hundred words about “architectural criticism today.

I think this: that there is an unsettling ignorance in our field about what buildings *do* and *how* they do it.

We lack the science: the science not so much of materials, fabrication, or form making, or even of the resource efficiencies that mark “sustainability.” We have our eyes upon these things now, and progress, in the main, will fall into the category of engineering. I mean the science—*scientia*, Enlightenment-style knowledge—of how buildings attract, generate, and sustain life in and around them. What kind of life? Human life to be sure but also animal and plant life. Needed is a post-post-postmodern understanding of the speed of shadows, of how air moves in a building, of what makes for spaciousness, of how we know where things are we cannot presently see, of how to make rooms we are reluctant to leave, and sidewalks we long to walk dogs on. Needed is a post-post-postmodern understanding of human needs and how buildings satisfy them, knowledge consisting of accurate phenomenological analyses, been-there insights, and even (hold on to something, now) *measurements*, offered at a level of detail that goes far beyond our present-day recitation of “issues” and how they have “been addressed—next slide please.”

For if we were to look closely enough, patiently enough, and knowledgeably enough, every good

building would deserve a book. Each book would have not just chapter *titles* (in eternal deferment of what one might actually read in them), but text, diagrams, ideas, norms, and facts-by-the-score that would satisfyingly answer questions about how this building “lives” (as in how this car “drives”), as well as questions of how it was built, what other buildings it resembles, and so forth. Such criticism could come close to matching the complexity of its subject, just as literary criticism can approach the complexity of its subject. And every building would have been experienced—by the critic anyway—first-hand and over days, in equivalency of reading a literary piece.

But maybe this comparison to literature is wrong. Maybe works of architecture are more like movies, rather few of which are examined with any care, and none of which are examined with anything like the intelligence, artistry, know-how, and hard work it took to make them. Ordinary viewers might pour out of movies like *Alexander* cooing about how “cool” it was. Fine. But film critics do not do much better: twenty or so smart sentences in verdict of a two-year, six-hundred-person, one-hundred-million-dollar deployment of expertise, technology, and energy, the sheer size and complexity of which could well have matched Alexander's original foray into Persia. It is in this disproportionality of content that architectural criticism is comparable to film criticism, especially when it comes from writers who have never suffered (or triumphed) through the day-to-day bringing-into-being of an ambitious building. Gehry's Bilbao has yet to be *really* written about. There are books of film criticism of course, with scene-by-scene analysis of, say, Hitchcock's *The Birds*, brimming with insight about both the production and the reception of the work; but one is hard pressed to find the equivalent in architecture. William H. Jordy's *American Buildings and Their Architects?* Eisenman's 1974 account of the Leicester

Engineering Building in *Oppositions?* My own *Deconstructing the Kimbell?* That was a try, but too short by about three hundred pages.

The fact is that criticism in all the nonverbal arts—from painting to music to cuisine—is a hasty affair by comparison to the art's production. I take this asymmetry to be deep and endemic to the whole enterprise of criticism. Altered reality, which all these arts set out to produce, is *reality* still, infinitely deep in its subtlety and infinitely elusive in its effects upon consciousness. Serious artists wrestle with its very body, like the biblical Jacob, emerging wounded and transformed with every work. Some critics are able to convey that struggle's meaning. Some critics struggle, themselves, to create an altered reality by their words, be it a glimpse of the artist's or their own. But most, with hands politely behind their backs, sniff at the work and think of something to say—something entertaining, something . . . not *untrue*, of course, but something summary nonetheless and preferably with a zing at the end.

Who wants critics to do more? I do. If I am right about the shallowness of our present understanding of what buildings *do*, then the role of critics (beyond showing evidence of that fact) is to avail themselves of the knowledge that would give *them* the eyes to see and ears to hear what, perhaps, the architect could not and the casual observer could not be expected to. And where that knowledge is not available, the critic's role would be to call for deeper investigation.

The phenomenon of *architecture*, after all, as over and above *building*, is close to magical. From stone and wood and steel and glass disposed this way and that, that way and this, memories and desires flutter up like doves from a hat, while spatial sensations—up, down, over, close, far, here, there—soundlessly sound out, like chords that reverberate in the sky and in our bones and make us glad to be alive.