

Criticism in / and / of Crisis: The Australian Context

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This essay is about architectural criticism, journal publishing, and architectural discourse in the Australian context. It takes as its object of enquiry the production, publication, and reception of the author's own essay, 'Three Complaints about Architectural Criticism', commissioned for the commercial journal *Architecture Australia* in 2003.¹ This essay can be seen as a justification and an apology, an argument and a polemic, about the role and significance of architectural criticism for architectural practice in Australia. That context, with all of its constraints and particularities, provides a specific case from which some larger conclusions can perhaps be drawn.

In contemporary architectural discourse, in Australia as elsewhere, the desire to think and to practice critically – to **be critical** – seems virtually universal, even if the specific meaning or means to achieve this often remain unclear. In particular, the prefix 'critical' appears to have taken on a talismanic character. Employed as a kind of charm, it both pre-empts and wards off a whole range of accusations: of commodification, of irrelevance, of empty formal experimentation, of the submission to spectacle and fashion, and so on. John Whiteman has argued that criticism, and a specifically critical sensibility, is both ubiquitous within and characteristic of our age. Following Immanuel Kant's pronouncement that 'our age is, in every sense of the word, the age of criticism, and everything must submit to it,' Whiteman argues that criticism has become a 'way of life' in modern Western societies.

Truth is what can stand up in the howling gales of criticism. Our age is one of deep suspicion in which everything must be questioned if it is to be substantiated. Truth for us is an unmasking, a laying bare... We cannot accept the world as it is immediately given to us through "ordinary" words and images, and instead look for justification behind the veil of deception.²

Miriam Gusevich notes that the origins of the word criticism, as derived from the Greek *krinein*, are 'to separate, to cut into,' and 'to judge, or discern'. 'It is also related to a discerning decision, a decisive point, a crisis (*kriosis*).'³ This provides an appropriate entry point into the Australian architectural scene, where there is a widespread belief that architectural criticism is presently, and indeed perpetually, in a state of crisis. Local commentators commonly complain that architectural criticism here is 'not critical enough', and that it is characterized by mild, politely descriptive, aesthetic or formalist approaches. Springing from this are a whole string of further assumptions – that critics are not sufficiently objective, that they are biased by their own connections within the small and close-knit architectural community, that they are complicit with the commercial bias of the journals, that they are timid and afraid of litigation, and that for all of these reasons architectural criticism is as sycophantic as it is irrelevant and ineffectual. But rather than blithely going along with the idea that criticism is in a state of crisis, it will be more interesting here to consider the assumptions and beliefs that these assertions are based upon, and thus examine whether the crisis actually exists.

It is perhaps revealing that the most comprehensive and significant text on architectural criticism remains Wayne Attoe's *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, published in 1978.⁴ The fact that this text has not been superseded in nearly three decades is cause for consideration. Perhaps it could be said that the 'theoretical turn' in architectural discourse, which took firm hold in the years after the publication of this book, served to turn attention away from the specific and distinct activity of written architectural criticism. This movement could be seen to have rolled critique and architectural practice together, and thus collapsed some of the specific and separate utility of written architectural critique. If that is the case, then it is only now that the hegemony of 'criticality' or autonomous and inherently 'critical architecture' is being challenged, that written architectural criticism might be thoroughly re-examined and re-valued.⁵ But whatever the explanation, Attoe's book remains a highly useful, if slightly under-theorised, reference point.

This is not to say that there has been no literature on criticism in the intervening years; far from it. A body of literature has attempted to place architectural criticism within a larger theoretical framework, with notable contributions by Miriam Gusevich, and Pattabi Raman and Richard Coyne.⁶ The work of Peter Collins has also consistently placed architectural criticism within a larger understanding of judgment in architecture.⁷ Other authors, such as Richard Bohn, have concentrated on specific aspects of writing criticism such as the choice of vocabulary,⁸ or on the choice of criteria for judging architecture such as Reyner Banham's 'functional considerations'.⁹ In recent years there have been several valuable contributions published in the journal *Architectural Record*, and these are distinguished by their emphasis on the practical problems and challenges of writing architectural criticism, especially for a popular audience, and in the mainstream press.¹⁰ There has been some examination of the role of specific journals in bringing together architectural history and theory with practice, with a particular focus on *Oppositions*.¹¹ There has also been a small but significant sub-genre of writing about the role of photography in published architectural criticism.¹² Much of this writing has originated from within the US or UK, but within Australia, Paul Hogben has undertaken research into questions of complicity, bias, and 'objectivity' that surround writing in commercial architectural journals.¹³ The journal *Architecture Australia* has also taken a lead, especially in recent years under the editorship of Justine Clark, in drawing theoretical discourse and practice together through an intellectual but engaged architectural criticism, and through encouraging a self-reflexive examination of the journal itself as a discursive 'frame'. This brings us back to the object of this paper, namely the author's own essay, 'Three Complaints about Architectural Criticism'.

This essay, which started with the notional title 'why architects need critics', was a wide-ranging, journalistic discussion of the milieu of architectural criticism, discourse, and journal publishing in Australia. But the nature of the forum in which it was published, and the rather startling reception that it met on publication, is also relevant here. Within the local scene there is a clear polarisation between academic and journalistic modes of criticism, with the former as long scholarly papers in low-circulation theoretical journals, and the latter as short and accessible articles in high-circulation, glossy commercial magazines. *Architecture Australia* (for which, I should state in the interests of disclosure, I am a contributing editor) is one of the latter. It is also the official publication of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. It is a commercial, professional journal, primarily aimed at architects, but also with a significant lay readership. It reputedly has the largest circulation of the local architectural journals, however it has sometimes (in the past) been regarded as a rather staid publication, constrained by its association with the Institute, and the attendant responsibility to be the official journal of record in Australian architecture. By comparison, and in crude terms, it is perhaps not as glamorous a magazine as *Monument*, and perhaps not as edgy or eclectic as *Architectural Review Australia*. It is not as theoretically inclined or polemical as the now defunct and sorely missed *Transition*, and neither does it have

the scholarly pretensions of the small local academic journals *Architectural Theory Review* or *Fabrications*.

In all of this, *Architecture Australia* emerges as a respectable, quality publication with a measured and generally decorous critical tone. This is not to say that there are no flashes of critical and rhetorical colour, and there have been moments in the journal's century-long history when it has been truly radical. But in the main, *Architecture Australia* represents the mainstream and the establishment. All of this makes the reception of my own essay, 'three complaints about architectural criticism' all the more interesting. It is worthwhile, then, to re-present some of the argument of that essay here.

Three complaints about architectural criticism

Architectural criticism depends upon architectural practice – this statement is so obvious as to seem silly. The reverse idea, however, that architectural practice also 'depends upon' architectural criticism, is more contentious. The common impulse would be to say that no, architectural criticism is a kind of ancillary activity that takes place outside the margins of true architectural practice, it is always supplementary and therefore subordinate - or even redundant. Yet could it be that works of criticism are sometimes more significant than the works criticised, and even that 'marginal' or 'bad' buildings could give rise to more telling insights than 'good' ones? In the end we must, I would argue, recognise that architectural criticism is useful in itself, in that it contributes significantly to a lively and thoughtful architectural culture. It is a tangible way in which the history and theory of architecture can be rigorously located in current architectural practice, and it is a central and invaluable tool in architectural education – in the basic teaching of design, as well as in the production of reflexive, informed, and discerning professional graduates.

Of course, a practicing critic such as myself would naturally believe that criticism is a valuable and worthwhile activity, that critics are not the embittered parasitical nitpickers that we are sometimes made out to be and that criticism itself can be a productive and creative practice, which is literary but also specifically architectural. More than this, I would like to think that architecture and architectural criticism are bound in a reciprocal and mutually constructive relationship, where each contributes in its own way to the other. But why this perception of constant crisis? And what is it based upon? One obvious answer might lie in Australia's famed 'cultural cringe', with its conviction that everything important, including 'real' architectural criticism, is always done elsewhere. But without delving further into such nationalist anxieties, it is possible to identify three principal attitudes about the purported crisis of architectural criticism in Australia. The first of these is that criticism here is 'not critical enough'.

Architectural criticism as 'not critical enough'

There is a pervasive belief that criticism is only ever rigorous and true if it is negative. In fact, as I have already noted, the etymological origins of the word 'criticism' relate more to discernment, disinterested judgment, and the ability to make distinctions, than to actual fault-finding. Nevertheless, in its everyday usage the word has become synonymous with negativity, with pulling things apart; and there remains a common belief that even the most insightful and incisive criticism does not count as adequately 'critical' if it comes to an ultimately positive, or even an equivocal conclusion. There is a curious masochism, or at least a deep sense of suspicion, to this sensibility that insists on recasting critical praise as obsequiousness. Perhaps, in some ways, this is a good thing – it is true that things are almost always more complex, and possibly more politically and economically grubby, than they first appear, so a certain skepticism is surely healthy. But it is also rather sad that enthusiasm or praise is read as a sign of naivety or weakness on the part of the critic. It also attests to a kind of readerly bloodlust, a belief that critics should be fearless – either lambs sent naively to the slaughter or willing martyrs to the cause.

Architects seem happy to see their colleagues publicly lambasted: the ‘outrage’ page in the UK’s *The Architectural Review* is often cited as an example of criticism that is appropriately ‘strong’. Sure enough, it can be very entertaining to read the rhetorical demolition of a bad building. Likewise, for the critic there is undoubtedly a certain frisson in nastiness, and a righteous satisfaction in condemning bad work. When it comes to their own buildings, however, architects remain astonishingly sensitive and precious, and given to vicious counter-attack.

Architectural criticism almost always happens after the fact, when the building (good or otherwise) is already a *fait accompli*. This leaves the critic in a difficult position – in the interests of being productive, there seems little point in railing against something that is already done and finished. Of course bad work can be exposed and discussed as a warning of what should be avoided in the future, just as good work should be emulated. There is also a strong argument that architectural criticism should concern itself with unbuilt schemes, with drawings and ideas and competitions, because it is there that it has the potential to make a direct effect on the design outcome. Architectural criticism also has a role in educating the public about the built environment, which should lead to better architecture through a better-informed client base.

Architectural criticism as ineffectual and irrelevant

The second of the complaints that are leveled against architectural criticism in Australia today seems to ring – rather depressingly – true. This is the idea that criticism is both ineffectual and irrelevant: that the problems of the built environment are so overwhelming and dire, that the vast majority of buildings constructed are so bad, and indeed so actively harmful, that if criticism restricts itself to dilettante commentary on a few notable, largely inner-urban projects, and passes over the worst excesses of the built environment in silence, then it is akin to re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

But this raises the idea that criticism itself is a kind of honorific activity – that even to be lambasted is a kind of praise, a recognition that the work in question is worthy of note. Likewise, if a work is ignored by the critics, this is an implicit snub, a form of approbation. Embedded within this is the notion of architecture defined in opposition to building. A building only qualifies as ‘architecture’, and therefore becomes open to serious critical evaluation, if it embodies a sufficient level of quality. The act of architectural criticism carries a judgment of value and worth by definition.

In spite of all this, one need only travel to the outer suburbs of any Australian city to see that architecture is not winning the battle for quality, whether measured according to commodity, firmness, or delight. In the face of such pressing problems, architectural practice itself is marginalized enough, and criticism can be seen to compound this, especially when enacted on solely aesthetic grounds.

But there is a hypocrisy here – on the one hand architectural criticism, particularly in conjunction with the commercial journals, is condemned for its apparent fixation on heroic form and grand gestures, yet on the other hand few people are actually interested in reading about visually or formally bland buildings. Likewise, architects may complain about the prevalence of eye-goggling glamour photography in the magazines, but most still insist on having their own buildings photographed in their best light and from their best angle. Of course there is nothing wrong with this, but if the journals are in fact constrained by an ultimately commercial imperative, then architects (and critics) would do well to examine their own commercial ‘bias’, especially the exploitation of journals as a form of cheap publicity. And this brings us neatly to the third common complaint about architectural criticism in Australia – that it is not objective enough.

Architectural criticism as ‘not objective enough’

The traditional view is that the critic stands in objective judgment of the work, evaluates and assesses it, weighs it against a set of criteria either stated or unstated, and pronounces it good or bad. This conception is predicated on the possibility of absolute value in architecture – the possibility that if a sufficiently authoritative and expert critic could be found they could make a true and final judgment of a building, and of where it sits on the grand, a-historical scale that is the architectural canon. This criticism would, in turn, be written in a ‘universal’ voice, as a series of incontrovertible statements. The idea of critical objectivity also extends to the notion that the critic her or himself must be sufficiently ‘distant’ from the work, preferably being an expert but disinterested bystander. This is partly why academics are commonly seen as particularly suitable critics – because they are ostensibly less enmeshed within the complex webs of friendship, alliance and commercial rivalry that condition the architectural profession.

These webs of complicity extend to the forums in which criticism is published. In order to be truly critically autonomous, so the logic goes, such a forum must be independent of any implicit or explicit obligation – to audience, architects, advertisers, patrons, or whomever – because any such relationship will result in self-censorship. Accordingly, the commercial journals are argued to perpetuate an architectural ‘star-system’, a kind of nepotistic ‘boys club’, where the self-promotion of the architect matters more than the quality of the work. In such a conception, the only winners are the ‘favoured circle’ of big-name ‘starchitects’, and architecture degenerates into fashion and commodity fetish. Many aspects of this attitude are questionable, but clearly they all stem from an idea that criticism is only true if it is objective. But this in turn is problematic; the unswerving belief that objectivity is necessary, and that the role of criticism is impartial judgment, should be open and subject to question.

No one approaches architecture with a clean slate: the critic and layperson alike come with a whole array of preconceptions and prejudices – that is, pre-judgments. I would argue that such prejudices are not only inevitable, but they are vital to the interest and value of a given critic’s position and voice. The important distinction is less between objective and subjective critics, and more between critics who are explicit about and aware of their biases, and a less reflexive critical practice that leaves its criteria and its assumptions unstated.

Evaluation is not the only, or even the most important purpose of criticism; critics also interpret, they articulate and identify the significance of architecture. Criticism is also a translation – it relocates and reconstructs the architectural object through language, and in so doing it re-creates that object anew. And this brings us, finally, to the relationship between the practice of architecture and the practice of architectural criticism.

What is good criticism?

It sometimes seems that architects regard critics as blood-sucking ghouls with no talent of their own who take out their frustrated architectural ambitions on the efforts of those who are actually out there doing it. But the fact is that the skills and talents required to be a good architect and those required to be a good architectural critic, while they have a degree of overlap, are quite different. And this provides a hint as to the possibilities of the relationship that might arise between the architect and the critic – a good critic can teach the architect things about their own building, things which they haven’t realised, haven’t noticed, and perhaps most significantly, haven’t intended.

Of the best critics writing in Australia today, some are architects and some are academics; there is no monopoly or franchise on the skill, and few if any of these figures have received formal training in criticism. But their work has significant commonalities. The best critics are informed, they have a body of knowledge – whether about architectural practice, history, theory, or some other thing – and they bring this knowledge to bear upon a work of architecture. In this way they read the work as an exemplar of larger issues, identifying and locating these in the architectural object, while also

placing it within a broader physical and intellectual context. The critical process thus simultaneously spirals inwards and expands outwards from the work.

‘Three complaints about architectural criticism’ was published in the November / December 2003 issue of *Architecture Australia*. By the time the next issue of the magazine was released two months later, it was clear that the essay had created something of a stir. While it may not seem significant on the face of it, by the journal’s own standards three letters to the editor, an unsolicited review in response, two editorials, and anecdotal reports of widespread discussion, was an almost unprecedented response. While not all of this was in agreement with the specific content of the essay, all the correspondents concurred that the issues it raised were pertinent, and that there was, indeed, a state of crisis in Australian architectural criticism. But the very unanimity of this response is enough to arouse questions. The essay had set out to articulate some commonly held, but rather underexamined and even lazy assumptions or ‘complaints’, in order to set them up for a more rigorous discussion and interrogation. What it received was an affirmation of these same complacent assumptions, and the sense that at last, someone had said what everyone was thinking. But this raises the rather curious and paradoxical idea that the crisis in Australian architectural criticism is not at all based in the three complaints rehearsed here, but rather in the comfortable and continuing belief in the crisis itself.

In light of all this, it remains to be seen whether architectural criticism in Australia is actually in crisis, and if so, why this is the case, and what might be done about it. But it is my suspicion that there is in fact no crisis, or at least that the level of crisis at present is the same as it ever was, or even that this so-called ‘crisis’ is in fact a productive and necessary tension, one which reflects the larger, historically unstable equilibrium between theory and practice, the academy and the profession, architectural discourse and architectural materialization. Architecture will always need interlocutors to speak of and for it, to analyze and describe and evaluate it. These interlocutors are architects, certainly, but they are also critics, and both have a crucial role to play in architectural culture.

Endnotes

¹ Naomi Stead, ‘Three Complaints about Architectural Criticism’, *Architecture Australia* 92, 2003, 50-52. Discussed here with thanks to Justine Clark, who commissioned the essay, and publisher ArchitectureMedia.

² John Whiteman, ‘Criticism, Representation and Experience in Contemporary Architecture: Architecture and Drawing in an Age of Criticism’, *Harvard Architecture Review* 6, 1987, 138.

³ Miriam Gusevich, ‘The Architecture of Criticism: A Question of Autonomy,’ in Andrea Kahn (ed.), *Drawing Building Text*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991, p. 23 note 20.

⁴ Wayne Attoe, *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, Chichester: Wiley and Sons, 1978.

⁵ This is the general argument in a paper co-authored by the author and John Macarthur, ‘The Judge is not an Operator: Criticality, Historiography and Architectural Criticism’, *OASE* 69, 2006, 116-138.

⁶ Gusevich, ‘The Architecture of Criticism’, pp. 8-24; Pattabi Raman and Richard Coyne, ‘The Production of Architectural Criticism,’ *Architecture Theory Review* 5, 2000, 83-103.

⁷ See Peter Collins, ‘The Philosophy of Architectural Criticism’, *Architecture: The AIA Journal* 49, 1968, 46-49, and Peter Collins, *Architectural Judgement*, London: Faber, 1971.

⁸ Richard Bohn, ‘Vocabulary: A critical discussion of architectural criticism, with the view that its vocabulary isn’t much help to professional or public understanding’, *Architecture Plus* 2, 1974, 70-71.

⁹ Reyner Banham, ‘Convenient Benches and Handy Hooks: Functional Considerations in the Criticism of the Art of Architecture’, in Marcus Whiffen (ed.) *The History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA teacher seminar*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965, 91-105.

¹⁰ See Suzanne Stephens, ‘Assessing the State of Architectural Criticism in Today’s Press’, *Architectural Record* 186, March 1998, 64-69, 194; and Andrea Oppenheimer Dean, ‘Listening to Critics: The Stage is Set’, *Architectural Record* 187, January 1999, 68-70, 73.

¹¹ See for example Joan Ockman, 'Resurrecting the Avant-Garde: the History and Program of Oppositions,' in Beatriz Colomina (ed.) *Architectureproduction*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988, 181-199; and Mitchell Schwarzer, 'History and Theory in Architectural Periodicals: Assembling Oppositions', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, 1999, 342- 348.

¹² See Thomas Schumacher, 'Over-Exposure: On Photography and Architecture', *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 1998, 4-7 and James Russell, 'Fading Photographs', *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 1998, 44-49.

¹³ Paul Hogben, 'Maintaining an Image of Objectivity: Reflections on an Institutional Anxiety', *Architecture Theory Review* 6, 2001, 63-75.