

The Rocket-Baroque Phase of the Ice Cream Vernacular: On Reyner Banham's Criticism of Architecture and Other Things

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Abstract:

Throughout his long, trans-Atlantic career as a critic and commentator, Reyner Banham turned his critical attention to a vast range of objects, places and activities. This is especially true of his writing in the 1970's and 80's, after he was invited by *New Society* to write (according to Mary Banham) on 'almost any subject that intrigued him'. Mary Banham notes that 'From boyhood Reyner Banham's interests had been very wide indeed, his curiosity particularly aroused by the unexpected and the incongruous and most particularly by anything with wheels and/or an engine,' and his writing is indeed marked by a respect, concern, and fascination for technical matters, in architecture and elsewhere. But the essays from this period, ranging as they do from 'reviews' of the potato crisp to the bolo tie, the clipboard to the first *Star Wars* movie, also serve to raise a series of questions about architectural criticism. Banham turned his specifically architectural sensibility to a startling array of non-architectural, technological and practical things, but what criteria did he use to evaluate these? How did these criteria differ from those he used in his more conventional architectural criticism in the same period? And perhaps most importantly, how was Banham able to reconcile practical, technological, formalist, programmatic and historical issues, whether in a building or a Gulfstream caravan, in his arrival at aesthetic judgement? This paper will examine selected essays from Banham's critical oeuvre to open the question of how his criteria for judgement shifted according to the nature of the object he was examining, and what this might mean more broadly for the theory and practice of architectural criticism in relation to technology.

Article:

In his address to the 1964 conference of the American Institute of Architects and American Collegiate Schools of Architecture teacher seminar, Reyner Banham quipped that 'history is... my academic discipline. Criticism is what I do for money.'¹ Now while this may have been a throw-away line, played for laughs, it provides a fitting introduction to this paper, since the distinction between the scholarly, rigorous, academic practice of history and the essayistic, journalistic, opinionated and rhetorical practice of criticism lies at the centre of my concerns here. This distinction, not to say polarisation, has dominated architectural theory for the past thirty years, and can be held at least partly responsible for the present malaise in the culture and practice of architectural criticism, where 'the absence of well-thought-out

¹ Reyner Banham, 'Convenient Benches and Handy Hooks: Functional Considerations in the Criticism of the Art of Architecture', in *The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar*, ed. Marcus Whiffen, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, p. 91.

standards for evaluation, a weak cultural context for debate, and the critic's need to write for several audiences with different needs and levels of knowledge are significant barriers.'²

If we accept judgement and evaluation, alongside interpretation, as key aspects of the value and purpose of architectural criticism, then how does an architectural critic derive and determine their criteria for judgement? How, especially, does a critic like Banham do this given the extraordinarily broad range of items that he evaluates – whether 'conventional 'high art' architecture, the styling of household appliances, or the latest science fiction puppet series on television'?³ In this context Banham provides a useful test case – as one of the most prolific and vociferous critics of the twentieth century, he opens both the question and the process of architectural criticism precisely by including it as only one part of a much broader critical practice. His oeuvre thus allows us to pick out the commonalities, and distinctions, between various modes of critical work. Three interrelated themes immediately emerge: the idea of Banham's work as *design* criticism, the significance he places on functional considerations and human use, and the common thread formed by his thoroughgoing interest in technology. As Romy Golan has noted, 'it is impossible not to fall under the spell of the wit and intelligence of the writing. Banham is one of the best reads, ever, on architecture. Yet at the same time few have shared his fixation with technology.'⁴ Banham himself noted, in the foreword to the first anthology of his critical writing published in 1981 as *Design by Choice*, that 'if the tone and style change, [from one publication to another] it should be clear that one thing does not – my consuming interest, through thick and thin, hardback and limp, in what happens along the shifting frontier between technology and art.'⁵

Banham was an amazingly prolific critic. Aside from his twelve published books, Nigel Whiteley counts over 750 magazine articles or reviews Banham published between 1950 and his death in 1988.⁶ Banham is most closely associated with the weekly journal *New Society*, to which he was a regular contributor for twenty-four years, producing a colossal 235 essays in a column entitled 'Society and Design'. But between 1958-1965 he also wrote regularly for the left-wing journal *New Statesman*, and between 1956-1964 contributed the 'Not Quite Architecture' column to *Architects' Journal*. Less well known is his work for a host of other art, design, and architecture journals, and his early regular contribution to *Art News and Review*, for which he reviewed art exhibitions, before turning to the architectural and technological subjects with which he is most associated.

In this context, much has been made of Banham's background and education in engineering – he undertook an apprenticeship in the engine division of the Bristol Aeroplane Company during the second world war.⁷ In much of the commentary on his writing the implication has accordingly been that he was not only theoretically concerned with, but actually technically understood, the way that mechanical and technological things work. Peter Hall writes that Banham 'started from his absolute engineer's knowledge of what things were like and how they really worked which made him impatient with – and contemptuous of – any theory that

² Suzanne Stephens, 'Assessing the State of Architectural Criticism in Today's Press', *Architectural Record*, vol. 186, March 1998, p. 68.

³ Nigel Whiteley, 'Banham and 'Otherness': Reyner Banham (1922-1988) and his quest for an *architecture autre*', *Architectural History*, vol. 33, 1990, p. 188.

⁴ Romy Golan, 'Book Review – Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future', *The Art Bulletin*, June 2003, p. 401.

⁵ Reyner Banham, 'Foreword', *Design By Choice*, ed. Penny Sparke, Academy Editions, London, 1981, p. 7.

⁶ Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002, p. 328.

⁷ Nigel Whiteley, 'Banham and 'Otherness': Reyner Banham (1922-1988) and his quest for an *architecture autre*', *Architectural History*, vol. 33, 1990, p. 188.

did not spring from the deep soil of experience.’⁸ Romy Golan speculates that Banham ‘probably would have liked to be described as the smartest engineer to have written about architecture’,⁹ while Mary McAuliffe writes that

‘One of his most enduring themes, influenced by an engineering apprenticeship... was the emancipation, abundance, and pleasure offered by twentieth-century technology... Banham urged architects to discard their artistic pretensions and run with the “fast company” of scientific and engineering experts.’¹⁰

Banham’s engineering training was later balanced by the opposite extreme, when he worked as a journalist for the *Architectural Review*, and concurrently studied for a PhD under the supervision of Nikolaus Pevsner at the Courthauld Institute of Art in London. His doctoral thesis was published in 1960 as *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, the book that made his reputation. In this text he was concerned with historiography as much as with history itself, attempting to unearth and re-evaluate the legacy of early modernists such as Bruno Taut, and Futurists including Filippo Marinetti, and in the process with questioning the monolithic and self-enclosed version of Modern architectural history that had been written by ‘the triumvirate of grandstyle architectural historians’ represented by Pevsner, Siegfried Giedion, and Henry-Russell Hitchcock.¹¹

It would be too easy to say that architecture provided the middle ground that allowed Banham to bring together his interests in technology and art, but nevertheless there is something in the complex functionality of architecture that surely provided a foil for Banham’s concern with both use and symbolic expression. He chose as his critical subjects a truly wild profusion of things, places and products, but as Walter Vanstiphout notes, his work has several key common threads.

‘From the admiration for car designers of Detroit, to the analysis of ice-cream-cart art, the evocation of power stations, the execration of the Getty Museum, the historiography of the motel, the archaeology of the sheriff’s star, the anthropology of the bolo tie, the survey of Frank Lloyd Wright, all the way to the celebration of air shows, Banham’s critique of design was always founded in a strong commitment to the people who were using and adapting and living on the land.’¹²

In recent years the examination of Banham’s legacy, as an important architectural critic but also one of the founders of the field of design studies, has continued apace. This has been assisted by two anthologies of his criticism, Penny Sparke’s 1981 edited collection *Design By Choice* and *A Critic Writes*, released after Banham’s death, in 1996. In addition, a central text in that movement is Nigel Whiteley’s authoritative *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, published in 2002. Reviews of that book have noted the political aspect of Banham’s practice, and the way that towards the end of his career he came to be ‘outflanked’ by both sides of the political spectrum, ‘on the right, by traditionalists who found his preoccupation with *Barbarella* and corporate logos unseemly, and on the left, by a more

⁸ Peter Hall, ‘Foreword’ in *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham*, ed. Mary Banham, Paul Barker, Sutherland Lyall and Cedric Price, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. xiii.

⁹ Romy Golan, ‘Book Review – Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future’, *The Art Bulletin*, June 2003, p. 401.

¹⁰ Mary McAuliffe, ‘Book Review – A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham,’ *JSAH* vol 59, no. 2, June 2000, p. 269.

¹¹ Romy Golan, ‘Book Review – Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future’, *The Art Bulletin*, June 2003, p. 401.

¹² Walter Vanstiphout, Book Review – A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham, *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 5, Summer 1998, p. 2.

socially conscious generation for whom his delight in the “aesthetics of expendability” seemed an extended apologia for mindless consumerism and a culture of waste, superficiality, and environmental irresponsibility.’¹³

The title of Whiteley’s book plays cleverly on the intertwined temporality of history and criticism in Banham’s oeuvre. If history is a critical approach to the past, then criticism is a historically-informed approach to the present which will, in turn, contribute to the writing of buildings and projects into the historical record. One might very well say then that any critic is a historian of the immediate future, but the thing that makes this such an appropriate description of Banham’s work is his attention to pop culture, to the passing parade of ‘noisy ephemera’ that makes up the everyday commercial vernacular. In some ways his writing itself was a contribution in the spirit of this transience, and Banham was clearly well aware of this when he wrote that

‘The splendour (and misery) of writing for dailies, weeklies, or even monthlies, is that one can address current problems currently, and leave posterity to wait for the hardbacks and PhD dissertations to appear later... the splendour comes, if at all, years and years later, when some flip, throw-away, smarty-pants look-at-me paragraph will prove to distil the essence of an epoch far better than subsequent scholarly studies ever can.’¹⁴

This temporality of the various modes of Banham’s writing has also been commented upon by Penny Sparke, who writes that ‘[m]any of his articles are ‘essays’ for his books – particularly his architectural pieces – but the others, on a cross-section of mass culture, serve to translate the ephemeral values within this area of culture into an equivalent language which adequately describes them.’ The magazine essays thus have some of the transience and apparent expendability of the things they discuss. Magazines themselves are consumed and then abandoned in the same economy as many of the other items of pop culture that Banham celebrates, unlike books – and architecture – which are designed and intended for longevity. They also employ a very distinctive mode of writing, an exuberant, impudent and rollicking polemical style, which swings along at helter-skelter pace. The space limitations inherent to writing for magazines mean that many ideas are touched upon without being fully developed, but this too is part of the pleasure of this mode of writing – it is a *hors d’oeuvre* rather than a main course.

The *Design by Choice* anthology is divided into two sections, the first devoted to ‘Twentieth-Century Architecture – History, Theory and Criticism’ and the second to ‘Pop Culture – Theory and Design’. This may seem a rather rigid categorisation going against Banham’s own synthetic and inclusive practice, which looked to break down hierarchical barriers between ‘high’ and ‘pop’ culture. But this division is nevertheless interesting for the contrast it sets up, between strictly and conventionally ‘architectural’ criticism, for instance the canonical essay on Stirling and Gowan’s Faculty of Engineering Building at Leicester University entitled ‘The Style for the Job’, and the essays which attempt to assimilate and understand popular culture, such as 1955’s ‘A Throw-Away Aesthetic’, in which was derived a methodology for much of Banham’s later design criticism.

Design criticism

Much of Banham’s written oeuvre has been understood as design criticism, and indeed a large part of his significance as an historical figure derives from his contributions to the then

¹³ Barry Katz, ‘Book Review: Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future’, *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 43, October 2002, p. 799.

¹⁴ Reyner Banham, ‘Foreword’, *Design By Choice*, ed. Penny Sparke, Academy Editions, London, 1981, p. 7.

nascent discourse of design studies. But this too opens a significant question in the present context – what is the distinction between design criticism and architectural criticism? What, more particularly, is the distinction between these when the object of critique happens to be a building? Does it imply that the criteria which architectural criticism might bring to bear in judgement of an object are different from those of design criticism? And what might these respectively be?

‘As Whiteley makes clear... what Banham liked and understood about design were two things, both of them adamantly pragmatic: its professionalism, which he compared to that of engineers and saw as a model for architects, and its recognition of the concept of expendability.’¹⁵

Functional considerations

In attempting to understand the commonalities and distinctions between Banham’s design and architectural criticism through the vehicle of technology, and particularly its inflection of ‘function’ and ‘use’, it is perhaps worthwhile to revisit his larger conception of architectural theory as a whole. In the conference address I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, Banham makes a series of broad observations about the state of the art, including the argument that there *is* no discipline of architectural theory, or not any longer, and certainly not in the architecture schools, where the term becomes a catch-all for things which don’t fit anywhere else.

‘architectural theory, as it is currently discussed at the moment, is all those things like sociology and other aspects of useful knowledge which have to be taught and are in fact not theory at all – simply miscellaneous background information that makes an architect a little wiser in the ways of the world and of the kind of social situation in which he will be building. But they are not architectural theory in the sense that academics would prefer to understand it, meaning a body of rules, a body of laws... derived from the observation of the form and functions of buildings.’¹⁶

But more pointedly, Banham argues that it is precisely in response to a functional brief, provided by a client, that the architect’s actual creative work occurs. In everyday practice architects do not, or not commonly, invent and motivate projects on their own, either funded by themselves or ‘sold’ entrepreneurially to an investor. Banham notes that architects, like lawyers or engineers, thus make a professional life of standing ready to be ‘propositioned’ by a client, they ‘depend upon someone coming forward with the proposition in one hand and the money bag in the other.’¹⁷ His point here is that the interesting and valuable and *critiquable* aspects of architectural practice are reactive to a specific programmatic task provided from outside, and to ignore this in favour of the elements of architectural practice which are either generic (not specific to the task at hand) or autonomous (somehow particular to architectural practice independent of its fulfilment of a task) is to miss the point at both ends of the scale. Banham goes on to make a strong case for the primacy of functional concerns in architectural criticism.

¹⁵ Romy Golan, ‘Book Review – Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future’, *The Art Bulletin*, June 2003, p. 403.

¹⁶ Reyner Banham, ‘Convenient Benches and Handy Hooks: Functional Considerations in the Criticism of the Art of Architecture’, in *The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar*, ed. Marcus Whiffen, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, p. 94.

¹⁷ Reyner Banham, ‘Convenient Benches and Handy Hooks: Functional Considerations in the Criticism of the Art of Architecture’, in *The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar*, ed. Marcus Whiffen, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, p. 94.

‘It is impossible to discuss the building without discussing what it is for. Above all, to treat utility as an affliction, as something that should be set on one side in discussing a building, is to leave out the reasons why the building was created in the first place and the performance that society expects of it. If you leave out the fact of utility, you leave out the “why” of architecture as a human activity; yet a great deal of architectural writing appears to (and has to) support this dichotomy of method.’¹⁸

From this he continues on to argue that the critic of a given building needs to have a thorough and expert knowledge of the brief in order to say anything usefully specific about it. Perhaps more controversially, he also argues that it is necessary to have direct knowledge of the architect’s intentions, and that criticism should concern itself with the ‘biography’ of the architect in the professional situation, and thus of the entire ‘life’ of the project from the point at which the task is accepted.

Limitations of architecture as a discipline and discourse

In the last essay he wrote before he died, Banham sought those things that distinguish architecture from other types of design or manufacturing process. Describing the arcane aesthetic conventions of architecture as a ‘black box’, he argued, radically, for it to be understood with much more highly circumscribed boundaries. This was explicitly an argument against the colonising tendencies of architectural discourse, the ‘vulgar cultural imperialism that leads the writers of general histories of architecture to co-opt absolutely everything built upon the earth’s crust into their subject matter’,¹⁹ just as it was an argument for architecture to be seen as a process rather than a product. More than this, his argument hinges on an historical and geographically located lineage.

‘Recognising the very straightened boundaries of architecture as an academically teachable subject, we might deceive and confuse ourselves less if we stopped trying to cram the whole globe into its intellectual portfolio. We could recognise that the history of architecture is no more, but emphatically no less, than what we used to believe it was: the progression of those styles and monuments of the European mainstream, from Stonehenge to the Staatsgalerie, that define the modest building art that is ours alone.’²⁰

In this conception, it is precisely drawings, in the strictly middle-Italian sense of *disegno*, that distinguish architecture as a practice and as an art. This would immediately exclude those design practices which do not employ drawings, such as those based on patterns, or on direct, applied adjustment at the time of manufacture.

Banham describes ice cream wagons as ‘the biggest invisible objects in residential Britain’, the design and manufacture of which were, at the time and place of his writing, dominated by a single company. He describes the way that this firm operates entirely without drawings or ‘design’ as such, but nevertheless produces remarkably sophisticated ‘styled’ objects, drawing inflections from popular culture such that there is an identifiable ‘Rocket-Baroque phase’, influenced by the aesthetic of the space race and of Batman. The point here is that even

¹⁸ Reyner Banham, ‘Convenient Benches and Handy Hooks: Functional Considerations in the Criticism of the Art of Architecture’, in *The History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture: Papers from the 1964 AIA-ACSA Teacher Seminar*, ed. Marcus Whiffen, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, p. 92.

¹⁹ Reyner Banham, ‘A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture’, in Mary Banham et al eds., *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 297.

²⁰ Reyner Banham, ‘A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture’, in Mary Banham et al eds., *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 297.

constructions like this might, in the kind of omnivorous discourse prevalent at the time and continuing even more extremely today, be taken as architecture.

Conclusion

To return to the quotation from Banham with which I began this paper, that ‘history is my academic discipline, criticism is what I do for money’, it is precisely through criticism of the everyday ephemera of popular culture that Banham reads history in the present moment. Thus the idea of the ‘throw-away line’ also becomes curiously appropriate – it is precisely those things we consume and then toss aside that define our contemporary culture, and in Banham’s attempt to make his journalistic writing as current and disposable as the things that he wrote about, he also approached a kind of durability, even timelessness. This method continues to hold currency today - Walter Vanstiphout, has extended the list of ‘Banham’s urban gizmos’ to include such present day items as ‘the Powerbook, the condom dispenser, the cellphone, the methadone van, the mobile sound system, and the freight container. In these and other gizmos one sees contemporary life.’²¹ This archaeology of the present, particularly inflected through the technology that permeates every aspect of life, that continues to make Banham’s work such an enduring model for critical practice.

²¹ Walter Vanstiphout, ‘Book Review – A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham,’ *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 5, Summer 1998, p. 4.