Architectural Criticism (Rennes, 18 Jan 16)

Université Rennes 2, Jan 18, 2016
Deadline: Nov 8, 2015

Hélène Jannière

Architectural Criticism: Part of Public Debate or Autonomous "Discipline"?
Workshop

This call concerns the first of a series of three international workshops, which will take place in January 2016 (Rennes 2 University), Spring 2016 (University of Bologna) and Fall 2016 (Paris and Rennes). The aim of these three workshops is to foster scholarship on history of architectural criticism and to facilitate exchanges between scholars involved in this field of research.

This first workshop is to be held at Rennes 2 University on Monday, January 18, 2016. It will deal with the relationship of criticism with "public opinion" and on the opposite side, its relation to architecture as an autonomous discipline.
To what extent does architectural criticism share common questions, protagonists and medias with the public sphere, with the "public debate"? Or conversely, has it an exclusive relation to the professional or the academic sphere? In this case, does architectural criticism tend to become an autonomous discourse, if autonomous exclusively refers to architectural theories/ histories? Does it refer to extra-disciplinary concepts? The various nature and degree of such an autonomy could be examined in different historical, institutional and cultural contexts: to what extent is architectural criticism autonomous from social uses, from the architectural design, and its economic production? Those are a few of the main questions that we would like to be addressed during this first workshop.

More precisely, the issues of the relation between architectural criticism and public opinion or public debate, of the reception of contemporary architecture in the public sphere, may be discussed in different ways, as suggested below: for instance, its connection to preservation of heritage, its relation to the judgment/evaluation of architecture and the evaluation criteria, and its relation to the so-called "crisis" of criticism.

In Europe as well as in Northern America, preservation of historic buildings and ancient city centers are a focus of interest for an increasingly large audience. By contrast, unless in certain public controversies and polemics (regarding for instance, issues of preservation in the context of urban renewal, from the XIXth century to the present), the relationship of contemporary architectural design to a "large" audience does not seem so easy nor so immediate in the eyes of architects, critics and commissioners. In different cultural traditions, this interest – as revealed by public media – and the roles of architectural criticism differ. To what extent may criticism be considered as an agent of mediation of architecture towards a "large audience"? What are the specific vec-

tors of architectural mediation towards the public?
Presentations might stress the issue of architectural criticism in relation to polemics on preservation, from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Evaluation and criteria
Secondly, the issue of "public debate" has also to do with the evaluation of architecture. "What is good architecture?" was the title of a recent special issue of the TU Delft periodical Oase. This interrogation is (at least) twofold: on the one hand, it may refer to the evaluation of architecture and of its social uses (see Saunders, Judging architectural value, 2007). On the other hand, it refers to the set of criteria and values defined in relation to a corpus of architectural theories.
Presentations might also stress the issue of judgment and different criteria in architectural criticism.

Crisis
Last, the issue of the architectural mediation towards the public may have to do with the so-called "crisis" of architectural criticism, whether or not this crisis is real or fictitious. Many authors (critics, historians or architects) have stressed the origin of this "crisis" in three phenomena of the 1980s and 1990s.
First, since the 1980s they denounced the collusion of criticism with the professional self-promotion of architects, with "urban marketing" of cities and the political and institutional communication policy of cities, regions and states.
Secondly, a whole generation of scholars who were critics as well as architectural historians (as Reyner Banham, Manfredo Tafuri, Peter Collins and others) has gone. Furthermore, many contemporary critics or even architects deplore that the "heroic" critic or the critique engagé has now disappeared: their prerogative, to name and designate groups of artists or architects, used to mark the foundation of artistic avant-garde movements and reinforce, even artificially, their coherence. Such a pessimistic vision of criticism is rather widespread in architectural discourse, namely in the architectural press, which from the beginning of the XXth century regularly denounces the absence of efficiency of architectural criticism and even declares its "death" (see for instance Martin Pawley, The Death of Architectural Criticism, 2008). It may be compared to the discourse on the "death" of art criticism, broadly disseminated among art critics and historians (see Rainer Rochlitz, James Elkins, etc.).
Thirdly, the absence or the rarity of clear-cut theoretical positions in the contemporary architectural debate – according to Ignasi de Sola-Morales (Differencias, 1995) "illegible" since the 1980s and 1990s – as well as the disappearance of groups and movements, of "theoretical" controversies, after the debates about Postmodernism and about Deconstruction, are sometimes invoked as a reason of this "crisis" of criticism.

This "crisis", as well as the uncertain boundaries or on the contrary the growing gap between a "critique savante" and a criticism intended for the public sphere, are to be explored, in the present day and in history. By questioning the crisis of the criticism, one may also analyze the intersecting relations between media and the public and the various kinds and types of criticism: the aim is not to produce typologies, but to shed light on those interrelations.

Theses issues can be addressed from different perspectives, either by documenting case studies or by presenting international comparisons, which could highlight different roles of architectural criticism toward the public.

The workshop will host papers authored by architectural and urban historians as well as scholars in different fields (i.e. sociology – philosophy – scholars in information and communication science).
Abstracts (English) of 300 words maximum, as well as a short CV including name and affiliation and a list of publications, are to be sent by November 8th, 2015 to:

helene.janniere@univ-rennes2.fr
and
mappingcritarch.emuhidine@gmail.com

Notification of acceptance will be sent by November 11th, 2015.

The workshop will be held at Rennes 2 University, Département d'Histoire de l'art, on Monday, January 18th.

For questions regarding organization of the workshop as well as the content, please contact helene.janniere@univ-rennes2.fr or
mappingcritarch.emuhidine@gmail.com

About the project:
Mapping.Crit.Arch: Architectural criticism XXth and XXIst centuries, a cartography/ La Critique architecturale, XXe et XXIe siècles: une cartographie (ANR Project ANR-14-CE31-0019-01)

The research project Mapping.Crit.Arch: Architectural criticism XXth and XXIst centuries, a cartography, funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche, aims at developing a field of research on architectural criticism and its history, from the very last decades of the 19th century to the present day. It is based on an international network of scholars, whose research involves history of architectural criticism on various levels and with different approaches (including architectural theory, history of preservation, historiography of architecture, history of architectural periodicals and of criticism). Nathalie Boulouch (Université Rennes 2 and Archives de la critique d'art), Anne Hultzsch (Bartlett School London and OCCAS, Oslo University), Giovanni Leoni (Università di Bologna) Paolo Scrivano (Boston University), Laurent Stalder (ETH Zurich), Suzanne Stephens (Barnard College, Columbia University), Alice Thomine-Berrada (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) are the main members of this network, which is hosted at Rennes 2 University and coordinated by Hélène Jannière (Université Rennes 2).

Argument
Architectural criticism blurs boundaries with other forms or types of architectural discourse: namely, architectural theory and history. Furthermore, the term "architectural criticism", which has no unique definition, must be clarified. Thus, instead of establishing an aprioristic and normative definition, this research project aims at comparing several concepts of architectural criticism,

related to their original cultural and historical contexts.
Therefore, thanks to its international dimension, the network permits reconsidering the historiography of architectural criticism. According to these different concepts of architectural criticism, the manners of writing its history differ: these different narratives stem from historically and culturally different contexts. One of the goals of the network is to contribute to a mapping of those narratives, as well as a "cartography" of those diverse definitions.
The project aims at considering the international dimension of criticism, as revealed by varied approaches of critics and types of magazines, by exchanges and movements, but also by cross--cultural and cross-disciplinary transfers. Concerning its main research axis, the project proposes to examine the relationship between criticism and the making of architectural heritage from the end of the 19th century to the present, as well as the investigating such problems as the "crisis" of criticism, the crisis of architectural debate, and the reception of contemporary architecture in the public sphere.

One of the main statements of this project is to consider criticism not merely as a body of historical, theoretical or philosophical texts on architecture. We consider that criticism also encompasses diverging protagonists, media, and international exchanges. Furthermore, by borrowing some of its notions from other disciplines, criticism is made of transfers between architecture and other fields of knowledge, as well as between the architectural profession and the public sphere.
By basing the research on this hypothesis, our project attempts to question traditional approaches of reception of architecture, and especially may tackle the concept of "reception" as a passive "reflection" of the building or the project in the architectural or public debate.

Reference:
CFP: Architectural Criticism (Rennes, 18 Jan 16). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 16, 2015 (accessed Nov 16, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/11014>.