

The Curious Architect or the Curiosity of Critical Practice

WILLIAM W. BRAHAM and MARCO FRASCARI
University of Pennsylvania

Professor. When I was a doctoral student, I needed part time work, so I sought a position with a local architectural firm. Though I had practiced for many years, I was very proud of my PhD studies, so they were noted first on my resume. After many disappointing interviews, I removed the PhD entry and was immediately hired. The Doctoral studies were plainly seen as a liability by practitioners.

Professional. After a decade in practice, I began teaching part-time and then pursuing a PhD, also part-time. At that time I had occasion to meet a medical doctor with a PhD who practiced and taught at a distinguished university. When I told him of my studies, he actually shook my hand, offering admiration for the courage to change careers. Even a clinical researcher saw no connection between the practice of architecture and philosophical reflection about it.

Critical has very nearly become a “plastic” word in architecture.¹ Kenneth Frampton coined a number of “critical” expressions in the early 1980’s -- “critical history,” “critical present” and, finally, “critical regionalism” -- to mark out and explore an architectural domain between world culture and universal civilization.² Since that time the term has shifted and swollen, taking on so many implications that it has been rendered nearly useless except as a banner. That increasing plasticity is part of the confusion surrounding the discussion of architecture and the relation between professors and professionals. This paper offers some macheronic observations about the curious nature of criticality and the loss of curiosity in architecture. In the current situation, these observations form a proposition about the role of speculation within the practice of architecture and an argument for the non-specialized cultivation of architecture in doctoral studies.

Since the advancement of the 19th century “professional project,” the discipline of architecture has been preoccupied with the development of exclusive categories of responsibility and work. The boundaries of the profession are notoriously hazy, overlapping with those of other building trades and even with the activities of experienced clients.³ In

emulation of the sciences, specialties have abounded; interior design, construction management, and historic preservation, among others, have divided up the domain of construction. Each new specialty has an operative focus and licensing (or certification) requirements more-or-less related to the professional definitions of architecture, which has itself been reduced to the tasks of coordination and marketing. The need to understand and cultivate architecture in its own right has led to the development of the PhD degree in Architecture. Although philosophical architecture has a very long tradition, the doctorate is a recent invention. In the English speaking world, the study of architectural theory only became customary in the early 1970’s. No course since the middle of the 18th century had carried such a title.

The contemporary view of architectural theory was mainly formed and promoted by architectural historians. Following the logic of their discipline, art historians view architecture as part of a scientific paradigm that presupposes an academic fabric. Architecture is simply the necessary object of classification and study. As part of the general effort to legitimize the presence of the discipline in the university, the courses taught by theory/history professors were necessarily propagandistic. Their role was to educate both future producers and consumers in the culture of architectural appreciation. The traditional criteria and periodizations of art history were well suited for instruction in visual appreciation, whereas the theory component of the curricula had to identify both its methodology and objects of study. Following the general logic of historic analysis, which addresses wars and moments of political conflict, the writings of 18th century French, “revolutionary” architects were investigated, then those of the Nazi and Fascist architects, as well as those of Russian Monumentalism and Constructivism. In a related tactic, the historic roots of contemporary practices and institutions were explored. Modern, pre-modern and proto-modern architectural manifestoes were collected to document the history of the modern itself, stabilizing it and making it available for study.

The next step was the invention of archives and museums, institutionalizing the theoretical study of architecture and its

objects. Architectural drawings, photographs and models became commodities requiring the presence of experts to testify to their authenticity. They were no longer seen as tools for developing the imagination of architects, but collectible objects to show status and wealth. Theoretician/historians became the parasitic experts in their trade, as art historians had earlier become adjudicators in the art market. The historical view displaced the professional one which had previously united inspection with speculation about future edifices.⁴

The concept of theory progressed as the architects educated by the first generation of theory/history professors themselves joined the academy. The course title, *theory of architecture*, was pluralized to *theories of architecture*, suggesting the more general history of ideas or of styles, often concealed within concepts of typology or methodology. When the results of classificatory histories were exhausted, *theory* became *Theory* and was made to conform with the French literary and cultural framework of the 1970's. The terminology evolved from "the raw and the cooked" to that of phenomenology and deconstruction. Much of the current sense of the word critical developed as these contemporary theories were opposed to historical ones. The terms critical theory, critical practice and critical drawing were invoked to signify their new textual, political or anthropological orientations, but the fields of curiosity were essentially unchanged, ranging from 18th century architecture to the historicization of modernism.

Professional. During the restoration of a house museum (for a local painter,) the project architect found himself negotiating between the preservation commission's demand for documented accuracy and the museum director's desire to reconstruct a studio skylight known only by hearsay. In a review, I suggested that the design of this impossible skylight would be the central detail of the project, but the partner-in-charge insisted that problems like that were for philosophers not architects. In other words, "follow the code, omit the skylight -- curiosity kills architects."

Professor. I was looking in the Positions Available section of the ACSA news when I happened on a discussion of the PhD among three Ivy League professors. They were describing the doctoral degree as a necessary alternative to professional training at the University level. The title of their remarks could have been, "curiosity kills cats, not architects."

The dolorous consequences of this limited framework of curiosity is that buildings are no longer seen as extensions of the architect's poetic understanding of human dwelling, but as expressions of pseudo-artistic obsessions. The origin of theory in art history fosters the architect's pursuit of celebrity and individual fame as historic or theoretical significance become the only remaining criteria of architecture success. Under the influence of this preposterous model, the subjects

of theory displace those of practice. They are developed under the sign of verisimilitude, without recognizing their place in a precise philosophical polarity. The opposite pole of verisimilitude is wonder, which intersects and invokes a number of other polarities -- the real and the fictitious, the credible and the incredible, the authentic and the false, and the rational and the irrational. Like the concepts of theory and practice themselves, these are inseparable pairs, known only in their interaction. Their combined role is to guide the identification of the essential and the superfluous in a given work.⁵ Constructions guided only by verisimilitude veer toward the narrowly functional or trivial.

The PhD should signify an architect balanced by wonder. Wonder is an insight. It facilitates the dissolution of the subtle pressures that hold the mind in fixed grooves and compartments, leading to imaginative thought. A practicing architect must frankly question the constructed world and only remains an architect as long as the capacity for wonder or astonishment is retained. From the wonder of amazement, perceptions unfold in new forms of imagination and new orders of reason. To transcend the impossibility of mastering every field and discipline, the architect must possess the analogical structure which links them together, allowing their solution in architectural constructions. The knowledge of logical connections, that is, the similarity of *logos* existing among all the *technai* of construction, derives from the concord between theory and practice. Merging the curious play of *Homo Faber* with the abstract reason of *Homo Sapiens* produces the cunning architect -- *Homo Solerte*.

Professor: This is a macheronic text. I began to write it before my dinner -- maccheroni al sugo -- though readers should sample it while they have their after-dinner macaroon. In this way longing forces me to be brief, while gratification allows readers to peruse it at their leisure. Macheronic language is necessarily autobiographical, displaying the other as self. Non-macheronic theories are like maccheroni senza sugo (without sauce) they lack both sense and taste.

Professional: I was inspecting the finishing of a steel and glass construction around which the project's main stair descended. In my drawings, the panel joint was red, but the painter had failed to paint it. When I directed him to do so, he asked, "why?" I had no immediate answer, but then suggested that a laser had cut through the store at floor level, leaving a glowing mark on the steel. He laughed and painted it. In subsequent site visits the story continued to develop, sometimes seriously, sometimes not. It was the best paint job I ever got.

The curiosity of the cunning architect is expressed in architectural stories. These stories must be clearly distinguished from architectural histories; they belong, instead, within the discipline of architecture. The difference between these two discourses is illustrated by the equivalency be-

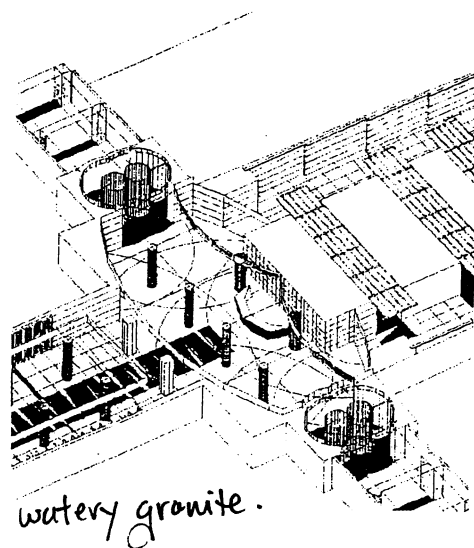
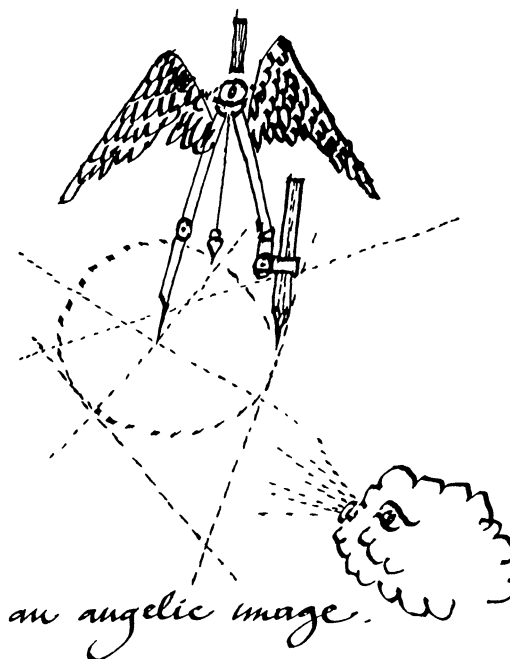
tween architectural stories and medical case histories. While architectural history and the history of medicine are specialized inquiries within the field of critical history. The same events can be related according to the logic and truth standards of either discipline. Architectural stories and case histories are ultimately disciplined by their future use and by the course which the project or treatment takes.

In English, the word curiosity carries the slightly negative connotation of snooping or prying, but in the original Latin, curiosity was a virtue, not a vice. Architectural curiosity is a speculative procedure which involves a taking-care-of the constructed world. The care of construction is based on the concept of *scrupolositas* or concern for minutiae, which lies at the heart of architecture's most powerful tool - irony. Attending to minutiae produces a unique visual clarity, drawing the mind away from the show and display of a building. Through this ironic clarity, distracted inhabitants can read and write themselves into architectural stories. Such tales are generally conceived metaphorically, but minutiae also operate metonymically, recording the traces of inhabitation. They receive the actual care of maintenance and repair in ritual procedures no longer available to allegorical constructions. Buildings move us as we move them. This curious science transforms the constructed environment through the fabrication of full-bodied images.

Professor: I first noted the etymological kinship of angles and angels in Vitruvius's explanation of the Tower of the Winds in Athens. Each angle of direction was represented by the figure of an angle. But that only initiated my curiosity. To Aquinas, angels were instruments, not symbols. Each of the tools of our trade has its angelic effect: marking or measuring objects and thought simultaneously. Even a walking compass can sprout wings.

Professional: I was puzzling about the central floor of a vast lobby project. We had tried everything, but regular patterns were either insufficient or overwhelming. I happened to be reading Bachelard's description of ripples on still water, which prompted an ironic image of the granite floor lightly echoing the activity of the streets and buildings around it. The solitary wave fronts fit the lobby in scale and quality. The image of a watery granite was neither sensible nor symbolic, but curiously instrumental. The client never heard the explanation.

In the practice of their profession, architects must educe buildings for others on paper or on the screen. They draw sections and perspectives so clients can determine that what has been evoked is precisely what they want to build. Construction, however, is a discrete process, while the habits with which people inhabit buildings are diffused over time. The architectural production of verisimilar images addresses the rigors of the former, but uncertainty arises in the determination of any future use or activity. Architectural stories



can dissolve the institutionalized boundary between construction and inhabitation by demonstrating habitual, everyday use. Through attention to minutiae, architects and clients project and examine possible futures.

Prof.: A well-known architect recently presented his work in an academic setting. He began by summarizing his "critical" position, succinctly deploying the terms of contemporary philosophy. When he paused, the hall was silent. He then returned to the familiar format of slides and stories, told in a noticeably different, descriptive language. He dwelt for a moment on a piece of cast glass, describing the complications of its fabrication, the accident of its placement and its color when wet. This time, the hall erupted in questions that began with "How?"

In the current examination of “scopic regimes” and visibility, critical theory must undertake to examine constructive curiosity.⁶ This leads to a curiosity for substance and shape rather than only for visual form. In architecture, this produces the metaphysical ability to see the instrumental life of constructed bodies beyond all the measured features of robes, veils, coverings, walls, and partitions. Employing the considerable power of architectural curiosity, the *ethos* and *pathos* of architecture can be revealed in the long tradition of architectural speculation. The stories of this tradition are both written and built, verisimilar and wonderful. Unlike the disputed artistic and literary canons, which exist to define their fields of study, the canon of the architect forms the curiosity cabinet in which constructive knowledge is discovered. Doctoral studies should exist to advance the care and study of that canon and the critical discipline of curiosity.

NOTES

- ¹ The concept of a “plastic” word that suffers from an excess of connotations was coined by Uwe Pörksen in *Plastikwörter: Die Sprache einer internationalen Dikatur*, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1988) (English version, State College: Penn State University Press, 1995).
- ² Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, (London: Architectural Design and Academy Editions, 1982). “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).
- ³ Some recent studies of these conditions are: Judith R. Blau, *Architects and Firms: A Sociological Perspective on Architectural Practice*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984). Dana Cuff, *Architecture: The Story of Practice*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991). Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991)
- ⁴ The historic parallels between the institutionalization of art history and architecture are quite close. The formation of the public museum as one of the first acts of the French Revolution involved a brief struggle between the previous pedagogical organizations of the royal collection and the new stylistic and chronological system which we still use today. The brief transition was precipitated by the need to impose political criteria on the initial mounting, but the “logical” system rapidly eclipsed it, permitting even the most decadent of the *Ancien Regime* paintings to be displayed as “history.” Andrew L. McClellan, “The Musée Du Louvre as Revolutionary Metaphor During the Terror,” *Art Bulletin* LXX, (1988): pp 300-13. James L. Connely, James L. “The Grand Gallery of the Louvre and the Museum Project: Architectural Problems,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XXXI (May 1972): pp 120-32.
- ⁵ “The question of functionalism does not coincide with the question of practical function. The purpose-free (*zweckfrei*) and the the purposeful (*zweckgebunden*) arts do not form the radical opposition which [Loos] imputed. The difference between the necessary and the superfluous is inherent in a work, and is not defined by the work’s relationship -- or the lack of it -- to something outside itself.” Theodor Adorno, “Functionalism Today,” *Oppositions* 17 (Summer 1979), pp. 31-41.
- ⁶ The “critical” literature on scopic regimes has become immense and is just now impinging on architectural studies. See: Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1990) and Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).