INFORMED SOURCES

ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA

by Mark Lamster

In 1969, in a nation divided over war and fearing the consequences of mechanization, R. Buckminster Fuller published *Utopia or Oblivion: The Prospects for Humanity.* This was the architectural gadfly's latest turgid sermon (it clocks in at more than 440 pages) on the need to embrace the technological future or face the dire consequences suggested by his title.

Fuller's book sprang to mind recently after the reading of another, albeit considerably shorter, exegesis on our potentially bleak future: "The Fate of the Critic in the Clickbait Age," by Alex Ross, the classical music critic of *The New Yorker.*

Ross defends the role of the critic but notes that in an era where the principal measure of journalistic value is popularity (as measured by digital traffic, or clicks), the arts generally and the critic in particular are doomed.

It is a problem we've struggled with at my own paper, *The Dallas Morning News.* It's hard for a review of a new building to compete head-to-head with an online story about the quarterback of the Cowboys or a tractor-trailer accident during the morning commute.

The plight is especially difficult for the music critic, given the "after the fact" nature of the standard review; once a performance is over, it's over, thereby obviating the review's utility as a work of service journalism. Architecture is fortunate in that it is not so ephemeral. A building may be a kind of "performance" in that it is orchestrated over time, but it is also a permanent physical object in the world, one that can be experienced on a regular basis and, for that matter, shapes the experience of its audience in a tactile and meaningful way.

The critic's challenge is to make the audience understand that impact in a compelling and visceral way. This in part explains the evolution of the role of the architecture critic away from a position that looks principally at signature buildings to one that more broadly addresses the built urban environment in all its varied complexities.

For the critic, this means an added sense of empowerment, but one that is commensurate with a growing interest in the role of the design disciplines in shaping everyday life. Curiously, this newfound attention has come at the expense of architecture, the mother design discipline. As more and more focus is directed at issues of urban equity (gentrification, parks, mobility), architecture can be portrayed as a tool and plaything of the wealthy, which it sometimes is. You can see this shift in your local bookstore—if you can find one. Shelf space that once went to architectural monographs is now devoted to books on cities, the progeny of Jane Jacobs.

An expanded purview entails new obligations for the architecture critic. Newspaper critics, who tend not to be journalists and not trained practitioners, generally come to the field with a background in architectural history, the study of great buildings and the men (because it was usually men) who built them. When the job was principally about reviewing buildings, that was fine. But now a broader education is required, one that encompasses urban planning, social policy, landscape, and—yes—architecture.

This knowledge will make the critic an effective voice for the community and also an informed source within the newspaper on issues of urban design. This is more significant than one might at first imagine: a good deal of municipal business is shaped by editorial boards, yet members of these boards are journalists without significant pedagogical training in the complex policy issues on which they are required to write. Even without serving on boards directly, critics can direct those opinions through their own writing or in casual conversation.

While it is right to worry over the death of the newspaper critic in the digital age, it's also worth noting that this is in some ways a golden era of criticism, a field that forever seems to be in crisis. The expanded field of the Internet means there are more people writing more criticism than ever before, that it is easier for new voices to gain traction, and that every discipline and subdiscipline and sub-subdiscipline can have its own easily accessible forum for ideas.

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Perhaps the single most important criteria for the critic is evaluating how a certain medium is adapting to, reflecting, and advancing the conditions in which it is created. Criticism itself has rarely had to do this, but now it is facing this dilemma; the critic needs to find new ways to respond to a changing media environment. That's a daunting challenge, but one it would be hypocritical, not to mention self-destructive, not to embrace.

All change entails loss, and the losses in the shift to a digital culture in newsrooms have been deeply painful for the arts. Critics are perhaps not prone to optimism, but there are some corresponding benefits: We're no longer constrained by the limits of the printed page; we can embed photographs and video and audio in our stories; and there are entire new platforms available to us—podcasts, social media, and whatever the next thing to hit might be.

Which brings us back to Fuller. Though there is something essentially naive about his techno-utopianism, he was surely correct in one respect: A failure to reckon proactively with new technologies is a sure route to oblivion. ■

PHOTOS
Shanghai-Lujiazui portion perspective (above left) and *New York City–Central Park* portion (right)*. From *Textscapes* (2015), a series by Hongtao Zhou that uses 3D-printed text to form extruded landscapes. Photos: Courtesy of the artist