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The Vicissitudes of Criticism in the Landscape Metropolis

In the field of the arts, criticism often plays a key role in situating artistic production and instigating debate, but especially in propelling theory and practice. As Dave Hickey suggests “Criticism, at its most serious, tries to channel change.” However, in the domains of landscape architecture, architecture, and urban design, criticism seems to have a more distanced role from reflection and design. Besides a few notable examples, such as the influence of the critical writings of Reyner Banham and Alan Colquhoun on a generation of British architects and urban designers in the 1960s, criticism seems to hold a marginal position in these fields.

Given that the objects of criticism –the urban landscapes and buildings that surround us– are very complex and layered realities, criticism seems to have a kaleidoscope of possibilities from which to start: the value frames (formal, social, cultural, political, aesthetic) are multiple and a panoply of methods is at the disposition of the critic. This broad scope of possibilities seems to paralyse the critical activity in the design disciplines. In-depth criticism seems to be a rare phenomenon and, if profound critical investigations are undertaken, they too often are rallied to the pages of very specialised academic and artistic journals that remain largely distant from design practice.

Against this background, the editors of this themed issue of SPOOL place the discussion on the possibilities and impossibilities of criticism within the field of the design disciplines at centre stage. We are especially interested in how criticism can make an active contribution to taking a position vis-à-vis what we have called, in earlier issues of SPOOL, the contemporary condition of ‘the landscape metropolis’. Criticism is an important means of reflection on the creative processes and interventions that are part and parcel of this landscape metropolis. It throws light on particular projects by describing and explaining them, but also by evaluating and generalising these reflections in relation to an entire discipline, be it landscape architecture, architecture, or urban design. As Miriam Gusevitch sharply notices: “Criticism is riskier than commentary. It is willing to judge and to condemn, to stake out and substantiate a particular position. Serious criticism is the careful and thoughtful disclosure of dimensions that might otherwise elude us...”

Out of this perspective, criticism can come to inspire us to visit a place in the landscape metropolis, to question our understanding of places and interventions, to make potential comparisons, to discover certain dimensions, to perceive the larger importance of a single place or project. In other words, criticism invites us to take a position and get into a dialogue (with the critic and with others) on the aims, the instruments, and the future of the design disciplines operating in the landscape metropolis. It also fosters a debate on what designers

produce and how it relates to societal needs, expectations, and responses. Terry Eagleton has pointed out that this is the main 'function of criticism': it moves the evaluation of design projects and processes out of the realm of 'single opinions' and situates it in a sphere of public debate, discussion, and evaluation.

Criticism seems very suited for publication in journals. The journal and its editorial board offer credibility to criticism. They guarantee that it is not merely an opinion by offering guidelines, by editing the article, and by applying a process of peer review. However, this is only part of the story. In the fields of architecture, urban design, and landscape architecture, criticism can take many forms that go beyond the article and can be uttered on many more platforms than the journal. To some extent, today's world allows anyone to position him- or herself as a 'critic', offering critical opinions without playing by the rules of a journal. However, one could ask whether this can still be considered as a 'grounded evaluation', in the way that the American philosopher Noel Carroll defines it, in his book *On Criticism. Thinking in Action* (2009). Within the rainfall of fast messages and instant opinions that characterise our contemporary world, criticism seems to be in search of a new future, and for a new definition of its relevance. What would happen, for instance, if the slow practice of criticism were to be considered as a particular form of academic research, which would be positioned at the field of encounter between academia and practice?

Establishing a forum for critical reflection at the crossroads of academia and practice has historical precedents, such as f.ex. the non-profit Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS), founded by Peter Eisenman in 1967, which assembled a core group of young architects to start the initiative – including, among others, Diana Agrest, Kenneth Frampton, and Anthony Vidler, and which also involved fellows such as Rem Koolhaas, and Aldo Rossi. Together they sought alternatives to traditional forms of education and practice, trying to set up a platform for debate, criticism, multidisciplinary experimentation, progressive education, improvisation, and applied theory. The original Institute was motivated by concerns related to research, education, and development in architecture and urbanism. It ran until 1985. Who is following up, who is nurturing the practice of criticism today? There are few initiatives to counter the absence of debate and constructive critical thinking within the design professions, probably because of their inclination towards competitive rather than collaborative business. However, if designers want to matter in society, sooner rather than later they must go beyond each professional's legitimate, but limiting, concern of fighting in favour of his or her own business, ultimately teaming up with others and critically acknowledging their own productions. Even if professional associations foster co-existence among professionals, they do not encourage critical thinking about engrained professional habits, which is the first step in advancing the profession with a view to becoming relevant players in larger societal issues. Constructive criticism instead of competition is hard to actualise in professional arenas. Could academics play a role in nurturing the practice of criticism today? Even though, in the design disciplines, the scientific inclination to objectivity is not at all an epistemological obligation, there are few scholars practicing criticism as a form of academic writing, and even fewer journals are interested in dedicating pages to this genre. In fact, both parties shy away from what seems an unfamiliar enterprise. Design scholars would well write ABOUT criticism but very seldom ENGAGE IN criticism – be it as to criticise a design project, a group of works, or an epoch of particular designerly convictions. This is what we experienced when we called for contributions to this issue of SPOOL, and it confirms our wish to further encourage academics to make this arena theirs, to develop criticism as an academic commitment to practice, a field of encounter with practice, as reflective practice *per se*.

The subject of criticism

For us, SPOOL editors, criticism is a way of engaging with the project itself. The key operation of criticism is based on physical contact with the project or actual site, through visits, observation, and intuition. But what is described, as well as why and how, is a matter of deciphering the what, and is handled through a dialogic interaction between survey and interpretation that eventually unfolds reflection anchored in space, in its structures, usage, form, memories, atmospheres, ecologies. As Roland Barthes explains in his seminal essay 'What is Criticism', "Criticism should reflect both on the work of art as on the process of criticism itself. Criticism should not reveal or discover meaning in a work, it should rather expose the process how meaning is generated."

Criticism is, in this sense, never only about a particular object. Following a specific line of questioning – a red thread – that determines how the critic examines and 're-presents' the design project under scrutiny, the critic points also to its broader relevance. The critic reveals how the singular design concept relates to the direct context of the wider metropolitan landscape, but also to the larger disciplinary context of theoretical concepts and design approaches. Out of this perspective criticism is always simultaneously about heteronomous and autonomous concerns, about the position within the metropolitan landscape and within the disciplines of architecture, urban design, and landscape architecture. Within the spectre between heteronomous and autonomous concerns, many approaches and methods are possible. We have received abstracts that suggest that there are as many practices of criticism as there are works of design and angles to evaluate them.

Discussing critique

A series of essays in this issue address the very figure of the critic, as well as the character, tools, and roles of criticism within the design disciplines. When people think about criticism they tend to hold rather stereotypical images of who the critic is, and what his or her work modes are. The first articles in this issue start to correct that image and suggest alternative vantage points. Opening with a photo essay by Kirstine Autzen on Copenhagen's much debated open urban space of Superkilen, we introduce Noël van Dooren's position paper on criticism in the field of landscape architecture – synthesising his research and practical experiences as a scholar and former editor for the critique section of JoLA, Journal of Landscape Architecture. He illustrates his thoughts by referring to concrete design projects, among them contested ones as Superkilen, suggesting that there should be much more than one critique written, and much more than one form of criticism developed in order to understand the scope of landscape architectural design and to advance professional work in this field. Belonging to an adjacent field, architecture, our author Per-Johan Dahl, both scholar and practitioner, analyses how his firm designed a building according to, but also in criticism of, the guidelines for historical preservation in a small Swedish town – his critique intermingles practice and discussion of criticism. Piero Medici, an architecture scholar, scrutinises architectural magazines as a tool to critically apprehend technical innovation as part of sustainable technology and/ or advanced architectural space – he takes us into criticism on a discursive level.

Practicing critique

The second group of contributions to this issue of SPOOL gathers authors who place themselves within the field of scholarly criticism – they very concretely scrutinise landscape architectural, architectural, and urban design projects in the metropolitan landscape. Very often these critical studies take the design intentions as their point of departure and critically explore the projects on their ability to realise these. An important insight: criticism can be formulated in great depth no matter whether the project is drawn or built – this means that criticism as grounded evaluation becomes a valuable instrument to both reflect upon projects before they are built, and to observe them after physical realisation. Our authors and researchers Ann-Charlott Eriksen and Svava Riesto criticise as yet unbuilt design work and investigate the outcome of an urban design competition in a medium-sized Danish city that aimed to become ‘greener’. The author collective, consisting of the scholars Greet De Block, Nitay Lehrer, Koenraad Danneels, and Bruno Notteboom, likewise criticise the entries to a metropolitan scale design competition for Brussels and scrutinise the inherent landscape architectural claims relying on ecological arguments while obscuring democratic frameworks. Landscape researcher Tadej Bevk’s critique engages with built work – he studies three urban design interventions in a small Slovenian town to understand their implications for the larger strategic urban development. Finally, action researcher and landscape scholar Anne Wagner criticises yet another project, and another category of design work: built, but temporary. She writes from her position as the critic of a concrete community-driven project, while at the same time developing a discussion about appropriate forms of criticism for projects that escape conventional procedures and belong to the realm of co-design.

The art of criticism

Because of its opinionated character, criticism in academia is often regarded with suspicion. However, upon closer scrutiny, the critic uses a transparent and convincing method, chooses a clear angle from which he or she discusses a design work, and makes sure that the evaluation goes beyond the particular project and tries to situate the findings within a wider field. As Miriam Gusevich points out, just like academic research, good criticism is, in this respect, “self-reflective, and takes the responsibility to substantiate its judgement.”

It is through this understanding of criticism as a self-reflective and substantiated practice that its affinities with academic practice might reside. These affinities offer the possibility to engender a new field of academic research that is positioned at the field of encounter between research and practice, between critical distance and engaged nearness to the design process and project. Such a field might offer the possibility to create a new proximity between academia and practice, but above all it might install a much-needed domain for lengthy and in-depth reflection on the landscape metropolis.

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SPOOL issue editors