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Author

Anderson, Stanford

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On Criticism

Stanford Anderson

Whether in architectural practice or in the activities of historical and critical writing, sometimes it is appropriate to consider the relative autonomy of a work and other times it is appropriate to consider a work in relation to its context. To enter into this issue, I would like to make a distinction between internal and external history.

Any realm of human activity, such as architecture, can be conceived to have both an internal history and an external history. Internal history considers what is unique to a particular field of activity. It is concerned with what is maintained under changing conditions and what may be seen to emerge according to an inner logic of the field. In contrast, external history demonstrates how the field of activity is enabled or constrained by the social conditions that surround it.

If one adopts a thorough-going determinism, the possibility of an internal history is denied. Within a deterministic position, every aspect of a field such as architecture, at every moment in time, is uniquely determined by the economic and political forces that drive the entire society. However, with even a slightly informed knowledge of a field such as architecture, it is not easy to sustain this claim of complete determination. There are aspects of architecture that persist under quite different conditions. There are innovations in architecture not readily reconciled with a claim of external causation. For the discipline of architecture as for

individual environments, there is a quasi-autonomous relationship with the enveloping society.

Facing this problem of accounting for the distinctive characteristics of architecture, the very people who set out from a deterministic position not infrequently attempt to save the situation through a clever stratagem. They maintain a form of historical determinism for society in general *and* a respect for the internal history of architecture by declaring architecture to be an autonomous field.

The core of my argument is to accept neither complete determination nor autonomy. There is, rather, an intersection between a relatively independent field such as architecture and the enabling and limiting conditions of society. There is some internal order to the field of architecture, but its intersection with a particular society is a matter of historical inquiry, *not* logical demonstration.

To pursue an understanding of this intersection—that is, the intersection of a certain state of the internal structure of architecture with a changing historical setting—I assert that we need more than one kind of history and more than one concept of the field of architecture.

Let us make a distinction, perhaps in not quite the conventional manner, between the *profession* of architecture and the *discipline* of architecture. Further, let us consider both a history of the profession and a history of the discipline.

For the purposes of this analysis—though I think this position might sustain some scrutiny—let us allow the term “profession” to stand for the way in which practitioners of architecture perform under specific historical conditions (I would also include here the practice of criticism as well as that of design). We may recognize that the activity of the profession is enabled by specific conditions of the society and limited by other conditions. This acknowledgment of external history does not deny that some choices still remain or that each of these choices incorporates factors that are best explained by attention to the field of architecture itself. Nonetheless, the profession will not, at any given time, employ all the possibilities that are known to us through architecture. Societal conditions may well set constraints on the range of work that can be undertaken. Similarly, fashions within society, or within the profession itself, may channel architectural decisions.

In contrast to the concept of “profession,” the “discipline” of architecture can be understood in the following manner. The discipline of architecture is a growing body of knowledge that is unique to this field; it cannot be reduced to the constructs of other fields. The discipline can be known without tracing every work realized by the profession, yet the discipline is the possession of a wider set of actors than is the profession. Important parts of the discipline may be preserved by, or advanced through, the work of builders, historians, critics,

or amateurs. While the discipline of architecture is not axiomatic, it is susceptible to theoretic formations that are constructed and changed in a disordered temporality, in fits and starts and anachronisms, unlike the evolutionary flow of the profession.

A history of the *profession* will be a narrative history, accounting for the state and the employment of the discipline in specific historical circumstances. A history of the *discipline*, an account of the quasi-autonomous nature of the discipline, will take another form. Even if temporally ordered, the history of the discipline will be notably marked by the conjectural activities of theory and criticism. It will not trouble to recognize “another good example of the same thing” but the

development of new potentials within architecture. Within the discipline, an innovation that opens new potentials can be rightly acclaimed even if those potentials are only realized later. A history of the discipline is an account of the periodic extension of the logic or order of the discipline. Since those periodic extensions may only be realized later, such a history is not in possession of a conventional chronological flow.

As you will have gathered, I am using “discipline” to name that social construct that embodies the internal history of architecture. That social construct incorporates not only architects but critics, theoreticians, historians, builders, engineers, preservationists, and lay

people. In addition, it incorporates institutions, archives, and libraries devoted to architecture. The profession employs only part of this discipline in the service of society.

There are individual works that deserve to be considered in their relative autonomy and for their significant contribution to the abstractions of the discipline of architecture. There are other, indeed many, architectural problems that must be heavily marked by the contingencies of their time and place. *Places*, in the sense of this symposium and this journal, are inconceivable without such contingencies. Yet the concept of place and the criteria for place-making return us to the discipline of architecture.