

ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM: A REVIEW OF TYPES AND CONTEXT

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Abstract

Given its wide scope, architectural criticism as a discipline has had a long history of discussions and debates over its uses, contexts, methods, and even boundaries. Authors have alluded to its complex and virtually indefinable nature. The term architectural criticism itself is diverse in its usage, as it is used to describe the activities of critics, academic architectural treatises, and the architectural design decision-making process. Beyond its architectural origins, architectural criticism itself also approaches architecture from an interdisciplinary standpoint, often blending and adapting the methods and ideas of other disciplines to architecture. Despite its long history, not too many review papers approach the subject from a broad and general perspective. The majority of previous works have tended to focus on gaps or more specialized matters within the subject area. This thematic review therefore focuses on the amalgamation of existing literature on the nature of architectural criticism. A keyword search, followed by a filter using inclusion criteria from the Google Scholar Database, identified 52 articles. After a review of these articles, only 26 were found useful. This paper synthesizes and discusses the works of different authors in the areas of types and contexts of architectural criticism. The discussions will benefit future studies on the general nature or characteristics of architectural criticism and can be used as a guideline for highlighting and understanding the key issues in architectural criticism.

Keywords: Architectural Criticism, Criticism Context, Criticism Types

1.0 Introduction

According to Sharp (1989), criticism is defined as "the art of judging the qualities and values of an aesthetic object" (Sharp, 1989; 9). Though criticism's primary aim is to focus on truth and unveil that which is true, beautiful, or essential in a work, the usual understanding and use of the word, due to the inclusion of the word "judge" infers "a finding of fault with", implying that there is an ideal position from which the work in question deviates (Raman & Coyne, 2000; 83). The word criticism is thus widely understood and used in the sense of judgment or finding fault with something, which tends to limit its use to the negative, thereby making the act of criticism innately

negative (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Whereas judgment is not the only valid use of criticism, and the negative suggestion of finding fault with something is not its purpose, as noted above.

The word "criticism" comes from the Greek word *krinein*, meaning "to separate, to sift, to make distinctions" (Attoe, 1978; Janniere, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2021). Though the Greek origins of the word seem to express the act of "discerning" or "judging", the latter (judging) is closer to the common and technical usage of criticism today.

Criticism can be summarized as an interpretation made with discernment, either of an evaluative judgment or a non-evaluative description (Ibrahim et al., 2021). The architectural critic's role therefore entails actually sifting and interpreting architectural knowledge while observing and narrating architecture or architectural discourse (Troiani & Ewing, 2015).

Beyond its definitions from the discernment and judgment viewpoints, other scholars have attempted to define and shed more light on the nature of criticism. It has been noted that its definitions depend on the contexts of historical periods and eras, disciplinary fields, culture, and audience (Janniere, 2010; Rashid, 2006). For example, from a cultural perspective, the words criticism may connote diverse concepts in different countries. In France, criticism is regarded as both an activity (a profession) or analytic commentary that evaluates and interprets a current work, whereas in the USA and Italy, it is a general theoretical discourse on architecture relating more to history and theory (Janniere, 2010).

Aside from being a discourse, commentary, and activity, architectural criticism has also been defined as an evolutionary and rational process (Collins, 1971) that assesses a work in the context of its practical circumstances, including its environment, and within political and procedural concerns. Attoe (1978) considered criticism a behaviour and purposeful response towards the built environment wherein individuals express their own perceptions of a physical place or an object in the hope of communicating their ideas to others (Harrison, 2022).

Janniere (2010) concisely summarises its many contexts and roles as "a profession (critics and their activities), a collection of social practices, architectural academic expositions, or an internal decision-making process in architectural design" (Janniere, 2010; 36). It is the intent of this paper to carry out a thematic review of the literature on architectural criticism with the aim of amalgamating existing literature on types and contexts.

2.0 Review of Literature

2.1 Boundaries and Scope

"Architectural criticism is the critique of architecture" (Ibrahim et al, 2021; 75). This definition, however, overly simplifies a discipline with a long history of deliberations and arguments over its uses, contexts, methods, and even boundaries. Architectural criticism's scope is quite extensive: traversing the public domain to more exclusive professional circles.

Given this diverse use and vast scope, its nature and purposes have therefore been subjected to continuous debate. Literature still notes the semantic ambiguity of ‘architecture criticism’ as a term (Janniere, 2010; Chaslin, 2006). The discipline of architecture and practice, where it takes its roots from, is in itself multi-faceted and this has influenced architectural criticism, especially in delimiting its boundary, enumerating its approach, and its nature and typologies in the economic, technological, social, and urban contexts where its influence pervades (Janniere, 2010). Beyond its architectural origins, architectural criticism itself also approaches architecture from an interdisciplinary standpoint, often blending and adapting the methods and ideas of other disciplines to architecture (Hacıömeroğlu, 2017). For instance, even the tools used in criticism for the analysis of architecture, came from other disciplines such as literature, art, human and social sciences (Janniere, 2010).

This very tension has been the subject of writings on architectural criticism, especially in the areas of its definitions, limits, focus (methods, plans, forms, social uses, etc.), and description of its tasks. However despite numerous attempts by scholars, efforts to make criticism, an object of research work or to establish the conditions for truly cumulative research are still ongoing (Janniere, 2010).

2.2 Nature

Criticism is largely constrained by an obligation to give an interpretation of a work - to appraise and locate it – culturally and critically (Leatherbarrow, 2009; Rendell, 2007). Though architectural criticism is sometimes erroneously considered as mere opinions, impressions, architectural reviews or commentary, writers have suggested that it is rather more than this (Rashid, 2006; Leatherbarrow, 2009). In this regards, Troiani and Ewing, (2015) posited that its primary purpose differs from that of mere reviews because it requires the taking of a position which may sometimes even be opinionated on the subject matter. Macarthur and Stead, (2006) corroborate this by noting that “criticism is riskier than commentary as it is willing to judge and to condemn, to stake out and substantiate a particular position” (Macarthur & Stead, 2006; 126).

2.3 Comparisons with other forms of Criticism

Rendell, (2007) posited that criticism’s explicit purpose is “to provide a commentary (a social and historical context, a judgment, an explanation, a discriminating point of view, a response, or even a point of departure) on a cultural work which could range from art, literature, film to architecture” (Rendell, 2007; 4). In the world of criticism, architectural criticism has been described as a “poor cousin” (Janniere & Scrivano, 2020; 19) to other relatively well known forms of criticism such as literature, and art in particular. In terms of its success and acceptance, its practice has remained historically less established and recognized in its relations with the public sphere when compared with other forms of criticism (Leatherbarrow, 2009; Janniere & Scrivano 2020).

Collins (1971) considered architectural criticism (judgment) as a form of professional criticism more closely related to objective legal and medical judgments than the more subjective criticism of art. Another difference as noted by Collins (1971), is that while the context (site) is important for architectural criticism, this may not always be true for art.

In Attoe's (1978) opinion, architectural criticism differed from art and literary criticism because it has a forward looking predisposition that is capable of influencing the future rather than merely measuring or recording the past. In this capacity, it can be used as a foundation for better informed decisions in the future (Attoe, 1978). Consequently, architectural criticism's span is therefore greater than almost any other type of criticism, because a current critique can be projected into, and have efficacy in the future (Janniere, 2010). In terms of differences between the other forms of criticism, architectural criticism may therefore have a more significant relationship to our everyday lives and the built environment (Harrison, 2022).

2.4 Basis

Architectural criticism is concerned with, and largely dependent upon, knowledge. As a discipline, it relies upon tools, information and knowledge originating from history, theories, as well as social principles and sources (Sharp, 2006). Two elements endorse criticism, the first being theory, namely a theoretical structure acting as a backbone to its different evaluations and the second being history; notably that the theory must be rooted in history (Sharp, 2006; Rykwert, 2006).

Critics use this knowledge of history and theory on a work of architecture and by so doing, they read the work within the scope of larger issues, identifying and locating these in the architectural object being critiqued, while also placing it within a broader physical and intellectual context (Stead, 2007).

The different standards and terms of reference used to judge architecture has been noted (Macarthur & Stead, 2006). Critics are often influenced by their times hence standards used to critic works which may seem obvious and accepted at a particular time are however not static and keep shifting over time (Chaslin, 2005; Leatherbarrow, 2009).

There is therefore no methodology or criteria that can be generalized for the criticism of a wide range of architectural works. Every architectural critic typically defines and declares the specific tool or frame of reference that will be used on the criticism of a given architectural work (Macarthur & Stead, 2006). In this regards criticism becomes a paradox as the standards for assessing architectural works are assumed, defined and redefined in the process of developing its criticism (Leatherbarrow, 2009)

Furthermore, criticism may also be influenced by the predispositions and biases of critics (Stead, 2007). While objectivity has been noted to be vital to successful critical work, critics however attest to its subjectivity (Sharp, 2006; Gras, 2006; Stead, 2007). Though architectural criticism may be either subjective or objective, objectivity however ought to remain its ultimate goal and responsibility (Salama et al., 2023).

The use of objective and scientific methods of judging architecture derives from the reasoning that as a science and an art, architecture needs both rational and scientific judgment, as well as sentimental and artistic evaluation and these do not need to contradict one another (Collins, 1971). Architectural criticism can therefore be carried out along two different yet mutual dimensions - a scientific and creative perspective (Kazerani, 2016). Both dimensions bring a tension to architectural criticism, whereby

the subjective interpretation may often seem opposing to the more objective and rational scientific perspective. Collins (1971) considered the poles of architectural judgment to be ‘professional’ and ‘aesthetic’, and contended that, “the essential difference between both is that one is simple and mechanical, whilst the other is complex and intuitive.” (Collins, 1971; 144)

3.0 Methodology

The primary selection criteria for the articles focused on identifying papers containing information on architectural criticism, especially with respect to its types, principles and contexts. The principal keywords used in browsing the Google Scholars database were “architectural criticism” and “architecture criticism”. The appearance of those keywords in all sections, including the title, abstract, and full text, were taken into account. When used on their own, the principal keywords interestingly found more useful papers than when additional keywords such as “types”, “principles”, “settings” and “contexts” were added to them in a bid to further refine the search.

For the initial search, articles published within the 5-year window period from 2019–2023 were initially selected. This specific choice of publication years was made to meet the initial review’s requirement of 70% of the articles falling within this time duration. This would enable the exploration of recent knowledge domains and contemporary issues related to architectural criticism while also allowing for referencing and comparisons with other seminal works in the knowledge domain. Articles were selected regardless of region or country.

Following the paucity of relevant and useful articles from the initial search conducted on the Google Scholars database, the duration of the publications was extended to cover a 25-year period, i.e., 1998–2023 while still maintaining the 70% factor i.e. a minimum of 70% of the articles was expected to fall within the stated period. From the identified 52 articles, only 26 were found useful after evaluation. Furthermore only 3 of the useful works fell outside the 25-year mark thus accounting for 11.5% of the total number of articles reviewed. Aside from journal and conference articles, book chapters and architectural theses and dissertations have also been taken into account for the review.

4.0 Results

4.1 Types of Architectural Criticism

In the bid to bring some measure of order to architectural criticism via its organization into groups or types, it is apparent that the parameters often discussed and used in literature are very much intertwined with its contexts, namely its source, target audience, or setting.

Pousin (2013) distinguished between four types of criticisms depending on their source and audience: journalistic criticism (written by journalists for the general public); professional criticism (written by professionals and published by magazines for architects); profane criticism (from non-professionals involved in the building process such as clients, sponsors, or users); and specialized criticism (considered a discipline with its system and methods and whose mode of dissemination is via reputable journals targeting intellectuals).

With the exception of specialised criticism, Pousin’s (2013) classification is similar to that of Collins (1971), who identified three kinds of criticism via the target audiences: a) the general public, b) the professional, and c) the profane.

From the angle of its relationship to the public domain, Janniere and Scrivano (2020) classified architectural criticism into the scholarly, the popular (being the users), and those by experts or users (producers). Stephens (1998) delineated between criticism intended for (a) distinct readership categories, (b) professional magazines and journals, and (c) theoretical criticism found in academic journals (Stephens, 1998). In another classification aligning with architectural critics (practitioners of architectural criticism) by Harrison (2022), three intersecting areas emerge: a) the academic, b) the popular or professional, and that of c) the lay or public (Harrison, 2022).

Ibrahim et al., 2021 noted that deriving from its description as "an interpretation made with discernment" (Ibrahim et al., 2021; 72), architectural criticism may be regarded as either tilting towards judgment (evaluative) or tilting towards the descriptive (non-evaluative). While evaluative criticism is a useful tool for producing better-quality work, the non-evaluative, on the other hand, is better for facilitating understanding (Ibrahim et al., 2021). However, as suitable and adequate as they may seem for the purposes they were coined and used for, the various classifications above do not sufficiently explain the different forms and natures of architectural criticism.

In regards to its organization, Attoe (1978) provided one of the most all-encompassing classifications of architectural criticism, categorizing criticism into three major groups: normative, interpretative, and descriptive criticism (Fig. 1). Though considered old, Attoe’s classification remains one of the most comprehensive classifications of architectural criticism (Macarthur & Stead, 2006).

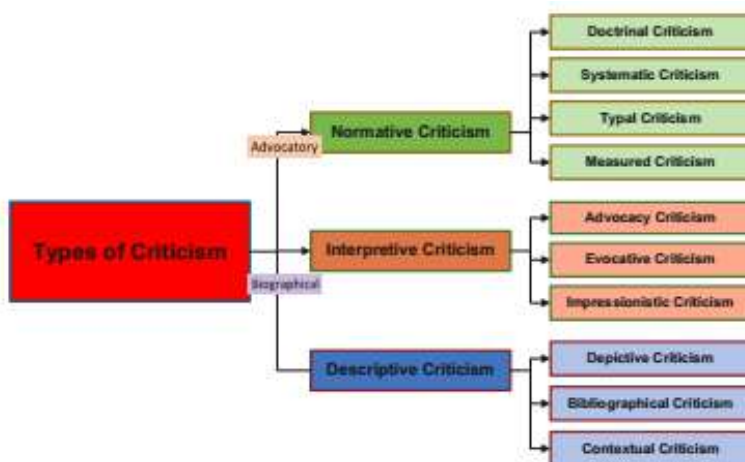


Fig. 1: Three categories of architectural criticism

Source: Ibrahim et al. (2021)

As seen from figure 1 above, the three basic kinds further have subcategories.

1. **Normative criticism** evaluates and judges architectural works from the viewpoint of (a) doctrine, or (b) system, (c) types (such as structural, functional,

formal etc.) or (d) standards. It is governed by belief in standards outside the environment under scrutiny and assessing the environment in relation to the standards contained in those beliefs (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ramadan, 2020; Oludare et al., 2021; Dare-Abel et al., 2019).

2. **Interpretive criticism** could be personal and subjective, and tries to get its audience to accept the idea or views being projected by the critic. Here, external standards are less important, and the critic's perspective and persona is usually more important than facts. Interpretive criticism strives to (a) advocate for architectural works (advocacy), (b) evoke an atmosphere about it (evocative), or (c) provide an impression of it (impressionistic) (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ramadan, 2020).
3. **Descriptive criticism** may be a) depictive, b) biographical, or c) contextual. It reports, with plain descriptions and typically carries out no judgments. Figurative descriptions are depictive while biographical criticism attempts to connect buildings and environments to events in the designer's life. Contextual criticism on the other hand further explains objects by relating them to social conditions, economic and political contexts, and other influences on the designers during the course of executing the work (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ramadan, 2020; Joseph et al., 2020).

While normative criticism originates from the evaluative form of architectural criticism, descriptive and interpretive criticism, depending on their respective aims are rooted in the non-evaluative form. Where the aim of descriptive criticism is to portray facts and project a true representation of the existing, interpretive criticism, on the contrary, provides a particular view of a building or environment (Ibrahim et al., 2021). The difference between the views produced by descriptive and interpretive criticism is that the former attempts to be objective while the latter is truly subjective (Ibrahim et al., 2021; Ramadan, 2020).

4.2 Contexts of Architectural Criticism

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the word context means "the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs". The contexts of architectural criticism as used here would thus refer to the setting or environment within which it can or does occur. Pousin (2013), noted that that there is a great diversity in works of architectural criticism hence criticism is always contextual and cannot be thought of in terms of being a homogenous entity. In essence, criticism is typified by the critic and his status, the audience being addressed, the setting, and the time the critique is carried out (Pousin (2013).

Architectural criticism uses a mixture of historical and philosophical contexts and a range of technological, social, and environmental influences to examine architectural works (Salama et al., 2023). Since it is all about the circulation of ideas, architectural criticism's context is quite extensive, covering the general public, professional circles, as well as the architectural community (Sharp, 2006).

Janniery (2010) noted a clear distinction between the context of public criticism (public realm or public media space criticism inclusive of those in major newspaper) and

theoretical criticism (theoretical activity in the academic and professional world). According to Janniere (2010), this division is the basis of the separation between professional journals and architectural theory and history reviews.

Beyond the public and academic contexts of criticism, Attoe (1978) considers the context of criticism as the setting for its practice and the situations in which criticism usually takes place. These are:

- a. **Authoritative:** office principals or teachers expressing opinions on and passing judgment on a subordinate's or student's work. The power of the authoritative figure is found in his position.
- b. **Expert:** Unlike that of the authoritative setting, the expert has no specific power over those he criticizes. The expert's influence is hinged on astounding and swaying others with his superior knowledge and insights. Examples of these are magazine and newspaper critics and historians (Ejoor et al., 2021).
- c. **Peer:** This context involves equals assessing each other on the basis of shared knowledge. Examples of this context include peer reviews in design award juries, design studio settings, books, and articles. Peers have no specific power over each other.
- d. **Layman:** The layman has no credentials, authorized power, information or expertise but his influence comes from his direct involvement with the built environment.
- e. **Self:** This is the context in which a designer criticises himself in the process of design.

Collins (1971) classified the settings for architectural judgments (criticism) to include a) the design process, b) competitive assessments, c) control evaluations, and d) journalism, here he considers the design process as the exercise of judgment in architecture, while the other three are judgments about architecture.

Architectural criticism cannot be carried out in a vacuum; hence, Collins (1971) insisted that to conduct reasonable, rational, and well rooted critiques, there is a need for architectural criticism to consider all features, influences, and characteristics of an architectural design, as well as the processes that led to the decisions made by the architects into account. Hence aside from the physical, economic, political and historical factors that an architectural work is situated within, it is important for criticism to also consider the process of its design (Collins, 1971; Leatherbarrow, 2009).

With respect to the environmental context, Collins (1971) argues that a design or building cannot be adequately criticized unless the critic is familiar with the site. The political context speaks to the governmental controls that influence or should influence architectural criticism, ranging from regulatory restrictions, architectural policies to all political pressures that can be applied on an architect to coerce him to design in specific manners during the design process.

Collins (1971) however opined that the procedural context is largely overlooked by architectural critics because criticism traditions typically focus more on the final product. Thus in his opinion, a building should therefore not be critiqued without reviewing the processes and decisions that influenced its final design.

Building up on Collins (1971) arguments, Ibrahim et al., 2021 further classified the contexts of design criticism (i.e. criticism of the design process) into academic, professional, and self-criticism. "Academic criticism" being that which tutors teach students in the academic design studio while the "professional" is carried out in professional practice and includes criticism between architects in design offices, between architects and clients, or between architects and contractors. There is also "self-criticism," which includes assessments designers make for themselves in the process of carrying out design work (Attoe, 1978; Ibrahim et al., 2021).

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, Sharp, (2006) notes that the global purpose of architectural criticism is to bring informed, independent, objective and critical commentaries on buildings and environment issues to a wider reading public. Though architectural criticism offers a real service and often acts as an important intermediary between the architect, the consumer, and the public (Sharp, 1989). The common disposition considers architectural criticism as a supplementary and subordinate or even redundant activity that is carried out outside the borders of architectural practice (Stead, 2007).

Architecture is enriched by criticism. And it is crucial and indispensable to architecture because criticism may reasonably be the only practice that authenticates the products of architecture (Ozkan, 2006). For critics challenge architects towards the best architecture through architectural criticism (Troiani & Ewing, 2015). Leatherbarrow (2009) notes that without it, projects do not progress, students fail to learn, and scholarship loses its very essence. Architectural criticism and architecture are therefore intertwined in a symbiotic mutually beneficial relationship within which each contributes its own quota to the other (Stead, 2007).

It is, however, not always clear what architects want from criticism or why and for whom critics are actually writing. Hence, modern-day architectural criticisms' continuous quest for a role that significantly contributes to architecture as both a discipline and a discourse to directly or indirectly inform and influence architects and their works (Preiser et al., 2015).

If permitted, architectural criticism has the capacity to considerably add to a vibrant and intellectual architectural culture and contribute effectively to the location of the history and theory of architecture in architectural practice and architectural objects (Macarthur & Stead, 2006). But a crucial understanding of the role and effectiveness of criticism within architectural culture is also needed. "The opportunities for making criticism relevant to architects and to the public at large are abundant. The challenge however lies in finding ways of identifying and grasping these opportunities." (Al-Asad, 2006;13)

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