

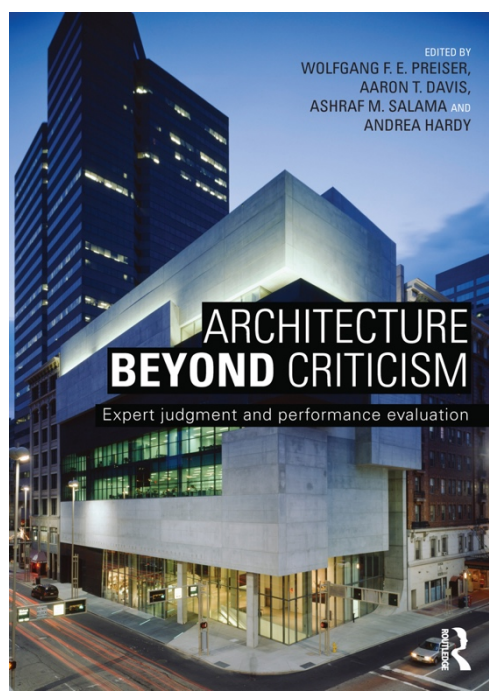
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.1625>

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Book review:

Architecture Beyond Criticism

Expert judgment and performance evaluation



Wolfgang F. E. Preiser, Aaron T. Davis, Ashraf M. Salama and Andrea Hardy, eds. (2015). *Architecture Beyond Criticism. Expert judgment and performance evaluation*. London: Routledge, 320 pages.

Both architectural criticism and building performance evaluation (BPE) aim to assess the quality of architectural works. Beyond this shared motivation, these domains seem to have little in common. The recent anthology *Architecture Beyond Criticism. Expert judgment and performance evaluation* puts this separation into question, arguing for the need to bridge the gap between architectural criticism and BPE. The major claim of this book is that these two frameworks can not only co-exist but can also, to a great advantage, supplement each other, enabling comprehensive quality assessment in architecture and, in the long term, improving the quality of our everyday environments.

A terminological clarification must be made at this point. Architectural criticism, as addressed in the book, refers primarily to the judgment of expert critics focused on the aesthetic qualities of buildings—a highly idiosyncratic dialogue between the perceiver (in this case, an expert critic) and the object perceived (Preiser et al. 2015:5). BPE, in contrast, has a more intersubjective nature. It is conducted by building professionals by using metrics focused on health, safety, security, functionality, as well as psychological, social and cultural satisfaction of building occupants. Performance evaluation studies typically involve “systematic investigation of opinions, perceptions, and viewpoints about built environments in use, and from the perspective of those who use them” (ibid.). BPE has evolved from post-occupancy evaluation studies (POE), regarded as a branch of environment-behaviour studies.

The anthology is edited by four authors with architectural backgrounds, having expertise in evaluation and programming of building projects, engineering technology, architectural criticism, combined with wide experience from architectural practices in USA and Egypt.

The text is organized in four major parts elucidating the history and evolution of architectural criticism and BPE. More specifically, the various parts of the book address 'Evolution and role of architectural criticism', 'Plurality of perspectives on criticism in architecture', 'Historical review and types of building performance evaluation', and 'Architectural analysis within building performance evaluation', plus Introduction and Epilogue. Each part comprises 5–6 individual and co-authored contributions by international architects and critics from the UK, USA, Brazil, France, Qatar, Egypt, New Zealand, China, Japan, and Germany.

The Introduction co-authored by the editorial team sets the stage for the book, arguing the need for integration of criticism and BPE in architecture and introducing a habitability framework against which such integration can be pursued. The editors argue that a combination of criticism and BPE would promote more humane and liveable environments, addressing a broad spectrum of human needs and values. In this context, they postulate that the understanding of these two frameworks should be reviewed to establish interconnections. On the BPE side, greater attention towards human needs and experiences is needed. With regard to criticism, there is a need to overcome the tendency to reduce it to an idiosyncratic perspective of a disengaged expert or the mere supply of marketing images and address the social and political dimensions of architectural artifacts. The new, more integrated framework for assessment of architectural works should be incorporated in architectural curricula to broaden the overlap of criticism and performance evaluation in architectural education. As for now, architectural academics and educators seldom manage to mediate between measured and perceived quality in architecture.

One reason for the separation of architectural criticism and BPE is the lack of common means of communication and conceptual background that would allow for integration of the two domains. To address this challenge, the editors propose the 'habitability framework' as a background for reconciling the aesthetic and the performative aspects of building evaluation. Habitability of a building is a term used in POE studies, and it refers to a building design that acknowledges human needs and, thus, provides a background for more meaningful and richer life experiences. In other words, habitability means that a building is designed with human habitation in mind. The essential questions here are "who is it designed for, how does it perform as an integrated system, and then how is it used?" (ibid.). The elements of the habitability framework to be considered in the assessment of architectural work include building/settings, occupants, and occupant needs (ibid., 8). For each building/setting, diverse groups of occupants are identified. Occupants are then differentiated according to their lifecycle phases, special requirements, cultural heritage, and other relevant factors. Furthermore, the needs of major groups of occupants are conceived on different habitability levels, roughly analogous to Maslow's (1948) human needs hierarchy. These levels include health and safety, functional and task performance level, and psychological comfort and satisfaction level (ibid., 9). In addition, habitability analyses should account for different scales: region (an assembly of communities), community (an assembly of neighbourhoods), facility (a complex of buildings), building (an assembly of spaces), room (an assembly of activity stations), and activity setting. The editors are aware that occupants' needs are not always easy to classify into neat categories. Yet, they argue that the development of concise and clear terminology and framework is crucial for future evolution of the design and behaviour field. In particular, there is a need to operationalize habitability-related categories for application in programming, design, and design evaluation.

The major strength of the habitability framework is its emphasis on a complex set of interrelationships between buildings and their users. The major challenge here, which somehow remains under-addressed in the book, is grasping the multidimensional experience of users in a non-reductionist manner. More generally, this is both an epistemological and a methodological issue, linked to the questions: 'What types of knowledge should be taken into account?', and 'How to obtain this knowledge?' In chapter 19, J. Nasar elaborates on how to assess aesthetic quality as

perceived by various users of a building by measuring responses to environmental stimuli, but this type of feedback may not fully account for the perceived quality of the built environment. In regard to the Introduction (and to some of the chapters), my major objection is to the manner in which the authors use the term objective vs. subjective (or ‘the real’ vs. ‘the perceived’), attributing the former to BPE and the latter to architectural criticism. Such a dichotomous positioning is misleading and unnecessarily widens the gap between BPE and criticism. Although claiming the objectivity of the metrics and measures in BPE is understandable with regard to energy performance or environmental impact calculations, it is far from evident in the case of psychological or social satisfaction of occupants. Evaluation of these aspects is largely based on a researcher’s interpretation and is thus far from the impartiality and neutrality ideal typically associated with the term ‘objectivity’. Yet, this interpretative effort from the researchers’ side is a very valuable aspect of BPE and should not be considered limiting. Similarly, subjectivity does not seem to be the weakness of architectural criticism—even though the editors point out that “researchers and scholars do not seem to place enough value on criticism because of its lack of objectivity (...) and because of how it can easily be influenced by politics and culture” (ibid., 15). Criticism is essentially about value judgments, and here, objectivity is an inadequate ideal to strive for. By not aiming for objectivity, we can nevertheless specify some quality criteria for criticism. These can be parallel to the quality criteria for qualitative research and refer to intersubjective validity or truthfulness. Thus, on the one hand, we can distinguish highly idiosyncratic forms of criticism, focused primarily on a critic’s aesthetic experiences. On the other hand, some forms of criticism stretch far to account for user perspectives, as well as the spatial and socio-political contexts in which a building is situated. This dichotomy inside criticism is overlooked in the Introduction. Yet, it is reflected-upon in the chapters that follow.

The following is an overview of the chapters and their major arguments.

Part II of the book ‘Evolution and role of architectural criticism’ begins with the contribution of A. T. Davis who addresses two major approaches within the field of criticism. On the one hand, there is a tradition of socially, politically, and culturally engaged critique, exemplified by texts of Ada Louise Huxtable or the more recent critiques of Paul Goldberger. These authors intended to educate the public and to evaluate not only architectural forms but also the wider consequences of architectural interventions for urban inhabitants. On the other hand, there are critics embodying “the blind optimism and self-congratulatory style-chasing of the huckster”, such as Nicolai Ouroussoff (ibid., 28). The latter type of criticism, ‘triumph of temporary style over critical substance’, reflects the identity crisis in contemporary architecture that acclaims new signature works, while neglecting their effects on a larger urban milieu. In this context, Davis argues that it is high time to rethink the role of criticism and learn from the socially and politically engaged perspectives. The renewed criticism should address a built environment as a locus of interaction and human well-being rather than “a backdrop for marketing campaign” (ibid., 35).

In chapter 3, M. J. Crosbie sees the chance to change architectural criticism from autonomous to more socially engaged with the relatively recent emergence of ‘citizen critics’. Owing to the development of ICT, a large group of non-professional critics has entered the field feeling empowered to reflect on built environments that affect their everyday lives. These criticisms focus less on the aesthetic qualities of buildings and more on the quality of life and urban sustainability.

Emerging forms of criticism are also addressed in chapter 4. Here, P. Gadanho argues that the activity of curating architecture (i.e. organizing exhibitions and creating cultural programs available for a wider public) can be understood as a continuation of criticism. This form of criticism goes beyond the evaluation of built works and often creates an impulse to ‘reposition’ architecture, and reframe its objectives and limits. Curating architecture, in distinction from the conventional written medium, makes criticism accessible to larger audiences and directly engages citizens in a debate. Yet, this form of criticism has constraints. Although the practice of writing

offers a great degree of autonomy, curation is more constrained by multiple dependencies, including economic systems and institutional agendas.

In Chapter 5, J. T. Lira discusses architectural criticism in Brazil of the 1950s–1970s against the backgrounds of social, cultural, and political transformations in Brazilian society. Two major proponents of a radical, revolutionary strand of architectural criticism—Mario Pedrosa and Sergio Ferro—are the focus of this contribution. Even though both of them were influenced by the modernist, functionalist approach to architecture, which was dominant in their time, their critiques were very innovative and refreshing in addressing such issues as the exhaustion of functionalism, appeal to new kinds of monumentality and publicness, and role of critical, reflexive, communitarian, or non-designed architecture. Thus, they seem to have extracted from their local experiences a few general criteria for evaluating architecture, modernity, and criticism.

In the following chapter, G. Solmonoff argues against the predominant focus on the visual dimension when communicating architecture. She points out that glossy magazines with their photographs and diagrams, the Internet, and client's rendered presentations have taken precedent over the first-hand experience of architectural space. This is also reflected in architectural criticism. Yet, when confronting actual works of architecture, we engage not only the vision but also all the other senses. Our impressions are determined, for example, by aspects related to the climatic, atmospheric, aural, and tactile qualities of building materials. Thus, critics should try to account for these dimensions to provide a possibly complete account of the discussed artifacts.

In chapter 7, T. Fisher considers architecture as a performing rather than a visual art, shifting attention away from aesthetic problems to the enquiry on how people interact with buildings and how buildings evolve over time. The field of 'performance studies' emerged in the 1970s, combining traditional performing arts with social and political science. From this perspective, performance denotes human activity in various contexts such as religious rituals, community celebrations, political protests, and workplace routines. Architecture provides an important background for different types of human performance, but its role is hardly mentioned in performance studies. By adopting the perspective of performing arts in architecture, one can see a building as a collective and collaborative effort rather than a work of an individual designer. This suggests a new role for the critic—going beyond the reflection on aesthetic merits and interpreting the larger meaning of architectural works against their social, cultural, and political contexts.

Part III of the book deals with 'Plurality of perspectives on criticism in architecture'. The chapters included in this part very much share the thematic focus of the preceding part, exploring different approaches to architectural criticism. Yet, the discussions here point more explicitly to BPA.

In chapter 8, A. Salama observes that projects celebrated in the public or specialized media do not necessarily satisfy users' expectations. Focusing on the aesthetic side, critics typically pay little attention to users' perspectives and activities. To scrutinize this tendency, the author juxtaposes media coverage and user feedback regarding Al Azhar Park, a large-scale project described as 'a new green lung' for Cairo. Based on an examination of 64 media reviews and 184 responses in a user survey, it appears that the media fell short in addressing symbolic, behavioural, and experiential aspects of the park, focusing instead on the design, environmental, and socio-economic aspects. Yet, the study indicates that users' responses to design features largely conform to critics' assessments. The major sources of dissatisfaction for users are issues related to maintenance and management: the lighting system and the navigation system. In conclusion, Salama argues for the need to supplement conventional criticism with appraisals of actual performance of architectural works, referring to the habitability framework presented in the Introduction.

In the following chapter, Y. Nussame addresses the influence of 'milieu' on architectural criticism. The concept of milieu is defined as "the relationship of a society to its environment" (Berque 1994, quoted on p. 104). The author emphasizes the need to take into account social,

cultural, and environmental contexts when assessing architectural artifacts and underlines the hermeneutic nature of architectural criticism. From this perspective, the role of critics is to interpret architectural artifacts in relation to their milieu. Thus, criticism cannot be limited to a journalistic opinion on the aesthetic merits of a building. BPE can provide a basis on which to make judgements, but criticism should go far beyond it, integrating vast cultural, historical, and technical understandings. In conclusion, Nussame points out that one of the challenges for criticism in our time is the lack of a unified conceptual background against which one can conduct critical activity to avoid particularism. He subsequently argues that the concept of sustainability could provide such a reference point for criticism and a platform for its integration with BPE.

In a similar vein, U. Baus and U. Schramm emphasize the importance of context in architecture. The authors refer to their experiences in Germany, where contemporary buildings usually have good technical performance and conform to numerous standards and certification systems but are seldom satisfactory from the design perspective. The most common problem is a lack of regard for a given setting—existing buildings and infrastructure, wider urban context, and social and political realities – and the subsequent lack of public acceptance of buildings. Not surprisingly, energy efficiency has been the critical factor in BPE over the past decades. To direct BPE's attention to buildings' contexts and functioning is, according to the authors, the major task for architectural criticism. Following this path, critics can be important allies of context-sensitive, participatory urban development in realities that are increasingly shaped by the interests of the real estate industry.

In the following contribution, R. Y. Gharib addresses urban conservation in Historic Cairo, reviewing critical assessments of the project published in popular press and architectural magazines over a 35-year time span. The review reveals different trends within local criticism. Specialized press included two types of contributions. First, practice-based critical commentaries focused on the details of preservation procedures and techniques. Second, theory-based contributions focused on specific problems such as the challenges of living cemeteries and the possibilities of resolving them via tourism. In popular press, the project was most often addressed via interviews with key actors in the restoration process, with an emphasis on two major objectives: safeguarding monuments and promoting beautification. No significant interests were displayed in the socio-economic aspects of the project, such as its impact on local communities. In conclusion, the author argues that conservation projects in Egypt should be assessed in a more rigorous and multi-faceted manner by integrating elements of post-occupancy evaluation. This applies also to criticism that should seek to extend its scope with aspects related to the performance of conservation projects and their impact on local communities.

In chapter 12, F. Duffy argues for a client-centric approach to architecture, postulating that architects should focus more on clients' needs and requirements early in the design process. In this context, he refers to RIBA's early ambition (1960s) to include user feedback/post-occupancy evaluation as the mandatory final stage of British architects' official Plan of Work ('Stage M'). Yet, the gathering of data on how a project responds to a client's original objectives was never made obligatory or even operational. It was most likely conceived by the profession as "too complex, too difficult and, above all, far too likely to lead to a trouble" (*ibid.*, 130). Owing to this attitude, architects, compared to other professionals, have taken too little advantage of the opportunity to learn from the success and failure of projects.

In chapter 13, P. Knox reasons that contemporary architecture culture is too focused on the innovativeness of design and technological solutions, leaving out the actual performance of architectural works. Originality is defined in terms of aesthetic novelty. Paradoxically, such an attitude has led to the homogenization of contemporary architecture: "the more these ostensible innovations strive to be dissimilar, the more alike they seem" (*ibid.*, 133). As the author argues, the most original projects today are the projects that are able to address the complexity of our needs through both architectural performance and architectural form.

The following part IV is aimed at 'Historical review and types of building performance evaluation'. Following this objective, in chapter 14, W. Preiser and A. Hardy provide a brief overview of the history and major milestones of development in the field of POE and its evolution into BPE in the late 1990s. Furthermore, they point out that comprehensive social, aesthetic, and building performance analyses are seldom conducted today. The prevailing approach to BPE involves a highly technical assessment. The authors argue for a more open, real-world-oriented approach that would guide and educate society by highlighting the social, political, and economic contexts of architecture, while simultaneously accounting for user experience. Within such a framework, BPE can be integrated smoothly with criticism.

In chapter 15, B. Bordass and A. Leaman investigate why it has been so problematic for the building industry and its clients to adopt routine BPE and ask what can be done about it. According to them, the major difficulty lies in the existing institutional and educational structures that conform to market realities and do not encourage a wider perspective on architecture. In this context, the authors advocate the practice of *new professionalism*—an approach where all building professions engage closely with the consequences of their actions, considering the social, ethical, and environmental dimensions. Such a transition demands new institutional and educational structures supported by governments and/or philanthropic institutions.

In the following contribution, C. Jacobson addresses the redevelopment of the site of Expo 2010 in Shanghai. Only 5 of 145 pavilions were designed to stand permanently, while the rest were to be demolished after the exhibition by their owners. A few of the pavilions were recycled and others rebuilt at different sites, but numerous structures continue to stand in the area—some are being reused, while others—abandoned and decorating. The author employs elements of BPE to identify the factors that determine the reuse of some buildings and the demolition and disuse of others. Some similarities to the preservation/redevelopment strategies employed in greater Shanghai were found.

Chapter 17 addresses the intersection of architectural criticism and building evaluation in Japan with a focus on hospital buildings. The authors discuss trends in hospital architecture in Japan, identifying two opposite traditions (e.g. abstraction vs. embodiment; tradition vs. fad; mega-structure vs. campus; privacy vs. supervision). This dichotomy of values in hospital architecture provides, according to the authors, guidance for BPE of hospitals and other types of buildings in Japan.

Chapter 18 offers a global perspective on post-occupancy evaluation. Based on 30 years of evaluating buildings in Australasia and Europe, C. Watson sees the fundamental purpose of POE as communicating stakeholders' experiences of buildings and—on this basis—generating recommendations for improvement. The perspective of stakeholders is seldom addressed in architectural criticism that frames architecture as an aesthetic pursuit. Critics' experience of buildings can be considered complementary to that of other stakeholders and provide input to building evaluation. Yet, architects should look beyond criticism if they intend to engage in a nuanced dialogue about architecture and contribute to the well-being and productivity of building inhabitants.

Summarizing the insights of this part of the book, D. S. Friedman argues that it is time to overcome the false dichotomy between design and performance. One of the barriers to fully integrated criticism is the public perception of an architect as an independent agent of building design. Another impediment is the autonomy of the architecture profession in defining the criteria of good design and good practice, as reflected highly in architectural curricula.

It is a viable postulate that architects should extend their focus beyond design and open their practices to inputs from other disciplines. Yet, in this context, the author makes a debatable assumption, pointing out that the humanities, in particular phenomenology and its' critique of scientific rationality (ibid.,201), have contributed to architecture's departure from real-world concerns and its orientation towards fine arts. A similar line of argumentation appears in the

Introduction, where the editors suggest that the failure of architectural criticism is related to insufficient attention to scientific perspectives. As I already noted, this framing of the challenges of architectural criticism in terms of the objectivist–subjectivist dichotomy is difficult to accept. Human sciences, in particular, phenomenology, have essentially contributed to recognition of the importance of context and users’ experience in architecture after a long period of modernist functionalism inspired by a dualist and reductionist perspective of the natural sciences. Thus, I cannot agree with attributing the failure of architecture (and architectural criticism) in addressing stakeholders’ perspectives to the influence of humanities as such. It can, however, be traced to strong influences of modern, Kantian aesthetics, focused on purely formal qualities of artifacts, promoting the view of artist as a genius creator, and giving priority to the judgment of an expert-connoisseur. The emphasis on science and technology is hardly a remedy to this problem and may actually contribute to an even wider gap between professionals and users. What is needed in this context is a humanities-grounded discussion of the status of different types of knowledge and their roles in architectural practice.

The final part of the book is devoted to ‘*Architectural analysis within building performance evaluation*’. In chapter 19, J. Nasar addresses the relevance of environmental psychology research methods in assessing the visual aesthetic quality of buildings as perceived by users. Research within this field addresses, among other things, how specific characteristics of an environment (such as variation, density, openness, naturalness, and order) affect evaluative appraisals—emotional responses and meanings. A study of users’ perceptions of visual qualities, Nasar argues, can provide a relevant basis for the development of solid visual quality guidelines for specific projects and feed into a database to help to address future questions. These should be integrated in general design guidelines to address the connection between function and appearance. Ultimately, the author calls for a user-oriented approach that involves people in decisions that affect them and yields environments people enjoy.

In the following chapter, B.C. Scheer introduces form-based codes (FBC)—a regulatory system for land development that is often substituted for the existing zoning code in progressive milieus throughout the US. FBC focuses on creating a particular physical result (typically: ordered, high-density places) rather than regulating and separating land uses, which is the case in traditional zoning. This approach allows for more flexibility regarding land use and density, but it is more restrictive in terms of the physical forms of buildings, sites, and public spaces. Environments conforming to FBC are often successful and people-friendly places, yet they are strikingly similar. In this context, the author addresses the vital role of architectural criticism in promoting more unique and creative solutions by responding to a given set of spatial, social, and cultural realities. Good criticism goes far beyond the formal qualities, addressing the message and meaning of a building, and the social and cultural context in which it arose. Accordingly, it has multiple roles—promoting design excellence, situating architecture in a wider cultural perspective, encouraging a more innovative approach to buildings and places, and empowering people by giving them a language to talk about architecture. Subordinating building design to BPE criteria (even taking into account the needs of the users) often results in competent, popular, comfortable, yet often unremarkable or tame settings. The vantage point of comprehensive, culture- and context-aware criticism can substantially enrich a built environment.

In chapter 21, Y. Mahgoub argues that more focus is needed on the socio-cultural contexts in which architectural criticism and evaluation studies are conducted because the character of a given society substantially affects what type of research and argumentation is considered valid. While democratic societies value the first-person perspective of a critic and a user, authoritarian societies prioritize quantitative measures and tend to consider qualitative studies as weak and unreliable. To improve the impact of criticism and evaluation studies in authoritarian societies, we need to connect them more explicitly to the realities of the architectural profession by

operationalizing their outcomes, that is, providing concrete guidance and strategies that could be easily integrated in professional practice.

The following contribution focuses on quality assessment in healthcare environments. The authors (D. Battisto, D. Franqui and C. Boecke) observe that while the field is replete with evaluation studies, few of them have been replicated in contexts other than the original. Most typically, studies use different metrics, processes, and sets of tools, thus hampering the transferability of findings and compromising the development of standardized databases that would allow comparing different objects. Addressing this situation, the authors present a prototype of a new structured POE approach to quality assessment of medical facilities and discuss its guiding principles, methodology, metrics, and data collection tools. Eventually, experiences from two pilot studies testing the proposed methodology on military health facilities are presented.

In chapter 23, K. Smith addresses the relationship between building performance evaluation and universal design, arguing for greater attention towards the aesthetic dimension of universal design. It is argued that universal design concerns are most typically limited to ergonomic aspects. This results in an industrial, machine-like appearance of designed solutions and poor integration of said solutions into buildings' spatial and material forms. This contradicts the original motivation of universal design, namely, a desire to integrate rather than segregate and stigmatize different user groups. Moreover, the possibility that the aesthetic qualities of a universal design solution can significantly impact users' well-being and satisfaction with a building is overlooked. In conclusion, the author argues that the concept of universal design brings together, at its core, three types of concerns: political (social justice), functional (e.g. ergonomics), and aesthetic (sensory and cognitive perceptions; material/spatial qualities). These three dimensions constitute a powerful, wide-ranging, and non-reductionist framework for assessing not only universal design interventions but also any type of architectural works.

In the following chapter, E. Walsh and S. Moore argue that architectural judgment is best understood as a public conversation through which a society shapes its material, social, and ecological conditions. Yet, the qualitative and quantitative tools of architectural judgment have generally failed to stimulate such a conversation. Qualitative assessment is too often limited to a highly idiosyncratic expert critic judgment—the exercise of elitist taste. Quantitative evaluation, in contrast, tends to focus on economic efficiency. These two modes of judgment are hardly relevant for the general public. Furthermore, they have failed to stimulate socially and environmentally relevant design—'regenerative design' design that goes beyond reducing the negative social and environmental impacts of a building, towards creating material, social, and environmental conditions in which individual and social life can flourish. One step towards transforming the dominating building culture and our environments in the 'regenerative' direction is to revive public conversation on architecture by engaging diverse stakeholders and types of knowledge in the creation of places. Public conversation, in order to be successful, has to be place-based and multidimensional, building up capacity for systems thinking in user communities.

Reflecting on the discussions in part V of the book, D. Friedman argues that BPE—understood in a non-reductionist, integrative manner—constitutes an ideal framework for architectural criticism by underlining a vast array of essential dimensions of a successful design and its systemic nature. An architectural critic addressing these dimensions from his/her perspective can provide valuable insights relevant for a wider audience, avoiding the idiosyncrasy of expert-connoisseurs. Such an extension of the scope of concerns is crucial for the architectural profession, which is being marginalized steadily. This marginalization is based on the public perception of architects—their narrow focus on aesthetics and disregard for wider social and environmental contexts of architectural interventions.

In a similar tone, in the book's epilogue, I. Ijeh criticizes the unintelligibility of language and the pseudo-intellectualism of the architectural profession. "[F]lowery prose, pretentious musing, convoluted phraseology and intellectual narcissism" are to give an impression of the

special competences of architects, but in fact, they reflect the architectural profession's disinterest with the realities of the users of architecture (ibid., 272). Such detachment from the wider public not only induces a negative public perception of architects but, more importantly, also threatens the quality of our built environments, which are being developed without any substantial dialogue with their users. As the author rightly observes, the language we use in public debates can have liberalizing, democratic, and empowering influence, but it can be also turn out into an obscure semiotic code enjoyed by a chosen few keen to claim their power.

Conclusion

All in all, the book is a much needed voice in the debate on the role of architecture and the architectural profession in contemporary realities. The gaps between the intended, perceived, and measured qualities of architectural works are hardly addressed in architectural practice. Yet, such concerns are becoming increasingly central to the contemporary architectural discourse, which can be defined roughly in terms of the opposition between two types of perspectives: a view of architecture as a contingent practice and a view of architecture as an autonomous realm. The contributions in the anthology clearly support the former perspective, arguing for architecture's stronger engagement with the concerns of the users and given realities.

I recommend this book to academic and professional audiences interested in the history and development of architectural criticism or building evaluation studies. One of its strengths is the variety of perspectives in it—the book offers insights from around the globe, written by researchers, curators, critics, and professional architects at different stages in their professional and academic careers. Such diversity has implications for the final product—the book is to be read primarily as a document mapping the variety of perspectives within building evaluation studies and architectural criticism, rather than a systematic discussion of a framework for integrating the two domains. Yet, the idea of such a framework presented by the editors in the introduction is a worthwhile and promising attempt.

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