From Critical Voice to Critical Mass: An Examination of the Current State of Architecture Criticism and Role of the Popular Critic

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Kristen Harrison
Dedicated in loving memory to my mother and father.

Written in loving honour of my sons.
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Abstract

The foremost intention of this research is to establish a more scholarly understanding of the academic, professional, and public significance of popular architecture criticism, and to re-imagine the role of the popular critic within a contemporary context. The thesis does so through the defining of its practice, an analysis of its current state, a review of its theoretical groundings, the analysis of contemporary and critical discussion, and an overlaying of these findings to establish the value and future potential of a democratized popular architecture criticism. It will answer the question: What is the current state and contemporary role of the popular architecture critic within the context of a democratized critical media landscape?
“For architecture, everybody actually is [a critic]. We are always in and around architecture and cannot escape its influence [...] You don’t need to be an architect to hit your head against the wall. Nor, one might add, to be a critic in order to shout ‘ouch!’”¹

“The duty of the critic, therefore, is [...] to empower his or her readers with an analytical tool with which to make the environment more comprehensible and tractable – to make the public more critical.”²

“Architectural criticism is obliged to support the primary duty of architecture itself: making life better. This is the lamp that should illumine every building we make and every sentence we write.”³

- Michael Sorkin

¹ Michael Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities (New York: Verso, 2011), 263-264
² Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities, 267
³ Ibid, 272
CHAPTER 1: Popular Architecture Criticism: *Current Conditions of a Critical Practice*

Sections

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I. Introduction: Current Conditions of Popular Architecture Criticism

“Of the many approaches to the problem of contemporary architectural criticism one could take in a study as short as this – stating its purpose, distinguishing it from other forms of writing or speaking, or describing its history, current state, and prospect.”

- David Leatherbarrow

“Criticism is itself an art form, and like all art forms it must evolve, or atrophy and die. There can be, despite the conservative battle cry of “standards,” no criticism for all time, nor even for much time.”

- Maurice Berger

The notion that popular architecture criticism is in a state of crisis is not a new concern, and is perhaps as old as the profession itself. Referring to critical writings about architecture for the public, and traditionally published in the mainstream press, this form of criticism finds its contemporary professional roots in the 1963 hiring of Ada

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1 David Leatherbarrow, “The Craft of Criticism” *Journal of Architectural Education*, (February 2009), 21
3 Vanessa Quirk, “The Architect Critic is Dead: Just Not for the Reasons You Think.” *ArchDaily*, April 2012
Louise Huxtable by the *New York Times* as the paper’s first full-time architecture critic.⁴ Yet despite its nearly 60-year history, very little academic attention has been given to popular architecture criticism. This is beginning to change, however, with conferences, research networks, and academics specializing in architecture criticism. And this research is not only addressing the potential crisis of criticism, but also the democratized media landscape which is allowing for new forms and voices to be heard and amplified. As a result, this now shifts the concern from the death of the critic, to questions of who is or can be a critic.

For while the democratization of criticism has potentially led to the demise or death of the professional architecture critic as sole arbiter of taste, it has also reshaped the role of the critic to become one who must educate and inform the public – to make the public more critical.⁵ This is due to the impact that architecture, and therefore the responsibility of its criticism, has on both society and the planet, and why it differs from other forms of arts criticism. Therefore, the argument becomes that the public needs to become more critical – that we must shift from a critical voice to a critical mass – and that the critic’s own role must also move to one of education and advocacy for a built environment that will lead to a healthier, more sustainable and “just world for all.”⁶ This, however, also shifts the discussion from the critic as a singular authority to one of potentially greater opportunities for influence. And there is theoretical support for this shift, for as we will see, the shift from the theory of value judgements of Peter Collins, to

the larger, and more open behavioral understanding of criticism in Wayne Attoe’s writing, culminating in Michael Sorkin’s assertions that “everybody’s a critic”\(^7\), leads to a new understanding of criticism that moves from a state of demise to a place of potential.

Therefore, the foremost intention of this research is to establish a more scholarly understanding of the academic, professional, and public significance of popular architecture criticism, and to re-imagine the role and potential of the popular critic within a contemporary context. The thesis will do so through the defining of its practice, an analysis of its current state, a review of its theoretical groundings, the presentation of a project, and a synthesis of these findings in relation to the value and potential of a democratized criticism. It will also ask the question: What is the current state and contemporary role of the popular architecture critic within the context of a democratized critical media landscape?

More specifically, it will do this by introducing the topic of popular architecture criticism, defining its practice, differentiating it from other forms of arts criticism and exploring its responsibility and role; explaining its current condition and state of crisis as a result of the democratization of criticism; and hypothesizing how it might be reconfigured. The thesis will then review and analyze the established theories of popular architecture criticism through a study of the theories of Peter Collins – *Architectural Judgement*

\(^7\) Sorkin, *All Over the Map*, 263-272
(1971), Wayne Attoe – Architecture and Critical Imagination (1978), and Michael Sorkin – All Over the Map (2013). It will then summarize the discussions and findings from the project of architecture, the 2016 POP // CAN // CRIT: Current Conditions in Popular Architecture Criticism symposium, before concluding with an detailing of the value of a continued but expanded practice of architecture criticism.

II. A Definition

i. What is popular architecture criticism

As expressed in this author’s paper for the MAPPING.CRIT.ARCH Third International Symposium: Toward a Geography of Architectural Criticism: Disciplinary Boundaries and Shared Territories, held April 3-4, 2017 in Paris, France, what is first required is to establish a theoretical definition of popular architecture criticism, and to “define what popular architecture criticism is (through the establishment of a definition), what it is not (through a delineation), and to give a very brief sense of the state it is currently in (which is rather a debacle).”

At its simplest, popular architecture criticism is the act of evaluating architecture through writing published in the mainstream media, and intended for the general or lay public. But even in its most straightforward understanding, this definition can be picked apart, word-by-word, and debated. For example [...] is criticism an act, activity, field, profession, academic discourse, or social practice? Is it’s critical nature to judge,

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find fault, analyze, question, decode, investigate, justify, or provide an account? Does it only include writing in its methods and mediums? What constitutes ‘mainstream’, within our increasingly democratized digital media landscape? And to whom do we refer to when we say general or lay public, especially in light of recent populist trends, and the fact that we already assume a literate public when we refer to print publications?

Even in reading the few, yet established, theorists on popular architecture criticism, mainly Peter Collins in *Architectural Judgement* (1971) and Wayne Attoe in *Architecture and Critical Imagination* (1978), we find conflicting ideas and definitions as to what popular architecture criticism is or should be. In this, three overlapping territories begin to emerge: that of the academic critic, the popular or professional critic, and that of the lay or public critic.  

Thus, in order to better define this intermediary role of the popular critic, and more importantly the domain of their work, however, we must begin with an etymological analysis of the two words that frame ‘architecture’ – *popular* and *criticism*. For this we look to Raymond Williams *Keywords*.

Beginning with *popular*, we find a complex and nuanced term, with imbedded and often negative implied meanings and innuendos. It is, therefore, interesting to note that the word *popular* was originally a neutral legal and political term, dating back to the 15th

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9 Kristen Gagnon, “Popular Architecture Criticism: A Definition, A Delineation, A Debacle,” 2017
century, and stemming from the Latin word *popularis* or, “belonging to the people.” By the 16th century, however, the word is seen as insulting, and as containing “a strong element of setting out to gain favour, with a sense of calculation [...] evident derogatory uses, such as Bacon’s ‘a Noble-man of an ancient Family, but uncommon and popular’ (1962).” This includes synonyms such as *common*, *low base*, and *widespread*, and the more contemporary notions of low-brow or of ‘selling-out’.

However, a more constructive meaning begins to be associated with the term *popular* by the 18th century, where it is seen to allude to the idea of being ‘widely favoured’, and more precisely by the 19th century, ‘well-liked’. This shift in the meaning of the word *popular*, from neutral consensus to negative commonality and finally notable celebration, then continues to evolve and invert itself once again to re-include the sense of representing the ‘people’s viewpoint’, rather than solely the idea of control or power over the opinion and favour of the masses. However a substandard undercurrent to the term remains. As Williams states, “it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press [...]); and work deliberately setting out to win favour.” He continues, “The range of sense can be seen again in popularize, which until the C19 was a political term, in the old sense, and then [takes] on its special meaning of presenting knowledge in generally accessible ways.”

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10 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 236
11 Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 236-7
12 Ibid, 237
13 Ibid, 237
14 Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 237
Eventually, the term is shortened to ‘pop’ by the mid 20th century, where it is used in relation to music and art, giving it a “lively informal” yet simultaneously opening it up to “a sense of the trivial.” Thus, our contemporary understanding of the term popular is still affected by the various past uses of the word and can, at present, be used to indicate both success and simplification, that which is widely accepted or accessibility, and as being publicly-minded or populous in nature. Thus, for the sake of this undertaking, we take the term popular, simply and without connotation, to mean ‘accessible to the general public’.

Moving to criticism, we are again left with a multi-faceted and layered word. In Wayne Attoe’s Architecture and Critical Imagination, he begins by observing that criticism originally meant simply “to separate, to sift, to make distinctions,” before siting Juan Pablo Bonta’s definition, which helps shed light on the subtle nuances of the term.

Bonta writes:

“The verb ‘to criticize’ is commonly used mostly in the sense of ‘to find fault with,’ ‘to pass judgment on.’ Yet, that judgment passed is adverse is not an implication of the etymology of the verb, since Greek Kρινειν (krinein) means simply to discern or to judge [...as opposed to the] current and somewhat more technical use of ‘to criticize’ in the sense of ‘to pass judgment, whether favorable or unfavorable,’ ‘to judge of the merits or demerits of something,’ ‘to evaluate.’

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15 Ibid, 238
But further, judgment is not necessarily judgment of worth. Not only evaluation but also mere description involves the exercise of judgment; and thus the word ‘criticism’ is, without impropriety, often used to designate simply the scientific investigation and description of the text, origins, character, structure, techniques, history or historical context [...] When the word ‘criticism’ is used in this sense, a critic is a person whose knowledge, training, and interests presumably equip him to study and describe a given work critically – that is, with discernment [...] [Ducasse, 1944].”

Williams echoes this need to clarify the connotations of the term, explaining, “Criticism has become a very difficult word, because although it’s predominate general sense is of fault-finding, it has an underlying sense of judgement and a very confusing specialized sense...” Williams’ own study of the word criticism begins in the early 17th century, where its first known English use comes from the mid 16th century terms critic and critical, themselves originating from the Latin criticus and the Greek kritikos and kritēs. From the late 17th century, it is used for the writing that embodies the judgement of literature, with Williams noting, “What is most interesting is that the general sense of fault-finding, or at least of negative judgement, has persisted as primary [...] But what is

17 Attoe, Architecture and Critical Imagination, 4
18 Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, 84-85
19 Ibid, 85
20 Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, 85
significant in the development of criticism, and of critic and critical, is the assumption of judgment as [an] even natured response.”

Thus a working definition of popular architecture criticism becomes an even natured response or judgement of architecture that is accessible to the general public.21

ii. Architecture criticism vs. Arts criticism

It is important to next delineate and differentiate popular architecture criticism from other forms of arts criticism. As previously noted, the hiring of Ada Louise Huxtable by The New York Times as the first architecture critic writing for a major mainstream publication was announced in a September 6, 1963 article in the paper entitled Architecture Critic Appointed by Times.22 Speaking to radio host Leonard Lopate in 2008, Huxtable was asked if ‘architecture critic’ was a professional position prior to her hiring. She responded: “There was no architecture critic [...] when I started writing for the New York Times. And when Clifton Daniels asked me to do the job full-time he said, ‘What shall we call you?’ And we decided that it was architecture critic.”23 As stated in the paper presented by the author at the DAKAM ARCHTHEO Conference, held in November 2014 at the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, in Istanbul, Turkey:

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21 Portions of this section were developed for MAPPING.CRIT.ARCH Third International Symposium: Toward a Geography of Architectural Criticism: Disciplinary Boundaries and Shared Territories, held April 3-4, 2017, Paris, France.”
23 Ada Louise Huxtable, Interview on The Leonard Lopate Show. Interviewed by Leonard Lopate, December 1 2008
According to *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne, Huxtable was asked to, “invent her own position and create her own authority,” ultimately receiving the first Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1970. For Huxtable, however, her ambitions went beyond mere criticism for criticism’s sake. Rather, Huxtable saw her responsibility as including evaluating projects at all stages of development, believing she could have an influence over projects, especially when in favour of them. In this way, Huxtable became both an educator and activist for architecture criticism, and worked to fully define the role of the popular architecture critic.

Huxtable’s importance within this tradition, and as an established beginning for the profession of popular criticism – despite not necessarily having been the first popular architecture critic in its more general sense – was also further made evident by her successor and critic Paul Goldberger (1996) in his remark that, "Before Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture was not a part of the public dialogue," indicating not only her influence on the field of architecture, but also within the public consciousness in a way that had not happened prior to her hiring. Thus, Huxtable worked to popularize not only the architecture that she studied and wrote about, but also the work of the critic who wrote analytically and convincingly about architecture.

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However, Huxtable would not only define the founding of the practice of popular criticism, but also be the one to first note how architecture criticism differs from other forms of arts criticism. Huxtable notes, architecture is affected by many internal and external factors, controls, regulations, conflicts of interest, and a need to balance both the functional and artistic components of architecture. Huxtable vividly details this struggle as taking place on a “battlefield of politics, money, and power,” where the total expense of building so far outweighs that of the production of art that there is no comparison. She further explains that, “Nor is any other art so constantly subject to environmental and community concerns that are totally at odds with the superscale of building today.” She then goes on to detail how architecture is an “impure art” due to its relationship with zoning bylaws, building codes, municipal review processes, and other, often compromising political and financial influences. As such, architecture criticism is seen to be set apart from other forms of arts criticism due to its significant relationship to both the built and systemic world as well as our everyday lives.

Further, in Huxtable’s short essay “Architecture Criticism”, published in the December 1990 edition of the Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Huxtable sets apart architecture criticism from other forms of arts criticism, due to the fact that architecture is, “the most complex and compromised of the arts, subject to a battery of

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27 Huxtable, “Architecture Criticism” 461
28 Ibid, 461
29 Ibid, 461
restraints, controls and conflicts of interest, always striving to find the line where art and utility meet.”\textsuperscript{30} This also includes “super scale” community and environmental concerns that face architecture.\textsuperscript{31}

Therefore, while the research of this thesis focuses very narrowly on the critical practice of popular architecture criticism, it is important to first look more broadly at the nature of other forms of arts criticism, in order to better understand how architecture criticism differs from them, and as means for a justification of architecture criticism’s significance and value.

As a compilation of various critical articles encompassing fields as diverse as film, fashion and music (architecture is only mentioned in one instance\textsuperscript{32}), Maurice Berger’s \textit{The Crisis of Criticism} (1998), indicates the wider ranging concerns for criticism. He begins his introduction to the text with an ominous declaration that while in the decades previous, critics may have played a vital public role in our cultural milieu, “influencing the shape, texture, and direction” of the arts, “their value and relevance is growing increasingly tenuous in many sectors of mainstream American cultural life.”\textsuperscript{33} Yet despite this overarching statement of criticism’s growing ineffective nature for all of arts criticism, Berger recognizes that each of these critical disciplines have come from various backgrounds and traditions, histories and audiences, goals, priorities and

\textsuperscript{30} Huxtable, “Architecture Criticism,” 462
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 462
\textsuperscript{33} Berger, \textit{The Crisis of Criticism}, 4
audiences.\textsuperscript{34} As such, the context of each specific form of criticism is important to consider, as well as the need to look for “social, cultural, historical, or psychological meanings below the surface of the story.”\textsuperscript{35} And while Berger places greater focus on the “language and rhetoric” of arts criticism, he explains that it is in the aim of moving criticism past a place of mere description and evaluation, or even advocacy, in order to enable it to inspire and provoke an emotional response from the reader, connecting them to the art.\textsuperscript{36}

In reference to this need for criticism to move past the place of literary work to a critical practice that can result in effect, Berger also states that, “The best critical writing of our age remains \textit{rigorous} and thoughtful. It aspires to something greater than the rewritten press releases that are frequently passed off as journalistic criticism […] The strongest criticism today – the kind that offers the greatest potential for the vitality and future of the discipline – is capable of engaging, guiding, directing, and influencing culture, even stimulating new forms of practice and expression.”\textsuperscript{37}

Here Berger further expands the potential reach of an effective criticism, one that can work at both the level of creating a societal influence, as well as encouraging new forms and methods of practice. He continues, “Art is neither value-free nor an independence source of values; to one extent or another, it always reflects the needs, politics,
intellectual and aesthetic priorities, and tastes of the artist, the institutions that support and disseminate his or her work, and the social and cultural universe of which both are a part.”38 Thus, ultimately for Berger, the critic helps the reader by connecting the artifact to its creator, sponsor, culture, and political situation, in order to better “understand the process and implications of art [...] and the relevance to their lives,” despite the fact that, “many critics fail to understand their own purpose and responsibilities in the greater cultural and social sphere.”39 And it is this knowledge of the implications or effects of art / architecture, only understood through an exploration of the processes that lead to its creation, that is what is lacking in criticism today, for Berger.

Moving from arts criticism generally, to journalist or popular criticism specifically, Michael Brenson’s article “Resisting the Dangerous Journey: The Crisis of Journalistic Criticism” acknowledges the fact that there has been very little academic study of journalistic or popular criticism, where it is a topic treated with little esteem. Brenson suspects that this is due to the fact that it is seen as unaccountable, and therefore, “Its enormous influence is taken for granted”.40 This article can therefore be seen as his attempt at making the case for the value and study of journalistic criticism, while warning of the dangers of excluding it from such scholarly consideration.41

38 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 11
39 Ibid, 11-12
40 Ibid, 104
41 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 104
Also signally the importance of studying journalistic criticism, Brenson explains how it is largely through these general publications, and these general publications alone, that the public is exposed to commentaries and opinions on art. However, he too laments the fact that few critics are now hired full-time, or given the resources to write in-depth, meaningful critiques. As such, he explains the need for critics to continually question their own work, to ensure that they are repeatedly reinventing the profession of criticism, and in return actively shaping the art or architecture of their time.42

Brenson writes,

“So criticism is for me not a position but a way of being. It is a way of encountering and being encountered, a way of testing and being tested, a way of feeling blind and beginning to see [...] a way of being true to the past and open to the present and future, of being true to the past by being open to the present and future [...] So the measure of critics can ultimately be taken by their ability to struggle with issues and ideas that at one time they had no idea how to deal with.”43

This then returns us to popular architecture criticism specifically, and how its most important difference from other forms of arts criticism is what gives it its need to be politically active.

42 Ibid, 125
43 Ibid, 128
Beginning by noting the differences between architecture and other forms of art criticism in her essay “Architecture Criticism,” Huxtable reckons that it is “like no other criticism” due to the fact that architecture is “like no other art.” This is because of the nature of architecture being “the most complex and compromised of the arts [and] subject to a battery of restraints,” including conflicts of interest, concerns of the environment, the need to balance art and utility, aesthetics and program, form and function, in addition to being a “battle field of politics, money, and power.” Thus, Huxtable explains that since architecture is the most complicated of the arts, the critiquing of architecture should also be viewed as more complex, including the need to understand the public impact of a building.

This public component of popular architecture criticism, and the fact that it acts as a record of our values, is contrasted by the fact that for much of the untrained population, architecture is unseen, and simply there, and that it is therefore the critic’s duty to both bring attention to, and ‘demystify’, its multiple meanings. Huxtable states,

“Criticism is a constructive act that carries with it the obligation to inform and educate, making possible the kinds of judgments through which the greatest understanding possible and pleasure are reached [...] Because what the critic is trying to do is capture one art with another, to translate the kinetic concept and visual, sensory and three-dimensional expression and experience of architecture

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44 Huxtable, “Architecture Criticism,” 462
45 Ibid, 462
into words, the only way in which data, rationale and evaluation can be communicated.”\(^{46}\)

In this we can see Huxtable’s understanding of architecture criticism as an art form in and of itself. Yet the contradiction comes from the fact that she first states that it is a “constructive act” – one with obligations, rationales, and a need to educate and judge – for such a heavy mandate would be hard to imagine being placed on other art forms. And as such, despite a lack of explicit comment from Huxtable, there is a sense given that architecture criticism carries with it many more obligations than other forms of arts criticism.

III. Current State:

i. **A Crisis: Death of the Critic**

Commonly referred to as journalistic, public, lay or professional criticism, popular critique has played an important role in the North American media landscape since its professional birth in 1963 with the naming of Huxtable as the full-time critic at *The New York Times*. And it has been in a state of crisis ever since. The most referenced reasons for as to why criticism appears to be in a state of decay or ‘death’ have been:

1. The democratization of media through the online digitization of information, publications, social media and self-publishing blogs, leading to a state where

\(^{46}\) Huxtable, “Architecture Criticism,” 463-464
‘everybody’s a critic’, and thus weakening the authority of the professional critic.47

2. The drastic reduction in full-time architecture critics hired by established publications, as well as the continually decreasing space allotted to architecture criticism in said publications.48

3. The resultant fact that many critics write part-time or on a freelance basis, leaving little time to afford research into the project, its processes, or its full social, environmental, financial, political and urban context.49

4. A loss of criticality, due to the now standard practice of re-written press releases, lack of presence of architectural theory, little architectural experience or training of professional critics and a loss of criticality paid towards the coverage and analysis of architectural projects.50

5. Fatigue from many of the leading critics’ fixation with ‘star architects’, and a lack of understanding of the larger societal impacts of architecture than formal or aesthetic critiques allude to.51

6. The move towards placing architecture criticism back into the portfolio of the art critic, or into larger domain of urban planning and urban critics.52

7. And finally, Paul Goldberger’s move from The New Yorker to Vanity Fair in 2012, signaling the end of a critical era reaching back to the first full-time hiring of Ada Louise Huxtable by The Times in 1963.53

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47 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 263
48 Attoe, Architecture and Critical Imagination, xvi
49 ibid, xvi
50 ibid, 2
51 Vanessa Quirk, “The Architect Critic is Dead: Just Not for the Reasons You Think,” (ArchDaily. Last modified on 06 April 2012)
52 Oliver Wainwright, “Baubles on Pedestals.” (Fulcrum. 2013)
However, in her paper presented at the *Critical Architecture* conference held at The Bartlett in 2007, architecture critic Naomi Stead claims that while there has been a recent trend towards commentators claiming that popular criticism is “not critical enough,” the idea of a crisis in criticism is perhaps based more in “the comfortable and continuing belief in the crisis itself”\(^{54}\) than in tangible factors or specifics causes.

Regardless of whether the crisis is real or perceived, this notion that architecture criticism is in a state of crisis is not novel, even within a Canadian context. This is evident through an article in the July 1967 issue of *Canadian Architect* where, after discussing the lack of formal training for architecture critics, the editorial article states, “In the meantime, architecture will continue to suffer from a lack of informed criticism especially in the popular press.”\(^{55}\) Yet even prior to the hiring of Huxtable in 1963, there were discussions about the state of criticism itself, within Canadian practice. In the October 1956 issue of *Canadian Architect*, an editorial titled “architecture criticism” notes calls from architects from across the country for the magazine to publish architecture criticism, to which the publication responds by stating that they plan to do so but that it is a “controversial subject, on which by no means all architects are agreed,” before sharing the arguments for and against doing so.\(^{56}\) This includes a quote from Thomas Creighton, editor of *Progressive Architecture* as saying, “I am coming to

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\(^{53}\) Quirk, “The Architect Critic is Dead: Just Not for the Reasons You Think”

\(^{54}\) Naomi Stead, “Criticism in/and/of crisis” *Critical Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 77


\(^{56}\) Canadian Architect Editorial, “architectural criticism,” (*The Canadian Architect, October* 1956), 62
the conclusion that architectural criticism today is very dangerous [to the cause of architecture]” but also that it is required for the “progressive development” of architecture’s ability to solve changing problems. It also asks the question that if other arts thrive on criticism, such as literature and painting, why is the same not the case for architecture as, “public interest and understanding of architecture presupposes a critical awareness of buildings in the public.”

Other arguments against publishing criticism in Canadian Architect cited included, liable laws, that criticism can damage an architect’s reputation, and that it can affect the value of a building. It also notes that as there are very few architecture critics, especially in Canada, it is therefore very rare for several critics to respond to one building and thus provides, “less opportunity than in most other creative fields for the striking of a balance [of opinions.]” It is also difficult for a critic to always view a project “on the site,” as opposed to literary criticism which is not tied to place, or art criticism where there are hubs such as New York City, making it not always possible to give full evaluation if the critic is unable to view the project in person.

However, according to the article, “The arguments for architectural criticism seem to us, on the whole, more persuasive than those against. We consider that the purpose of this criticism is to be two-fold: for the audience, a matter of interpretation and education; for the performer, a matter of appraisal related to improving the next performance.”

57 Canadian Architect Editorial, “architectural criticism,” 62
58 Ibid, 62
also notes that the profession could benefit from “the guidance of informed and sensitive lay critics in the public press.” The article then concludes by stating, “We suggest that the few good critics now occasionally writing should receive encouragement. Whether you agree with his views or not, write him, phone him, buy him a drink,” before reiterating the need for “top flight criticism.”59

Another place of potential crisis in popular criticism is the identified growing divide between popular and academic criticism. This idea is explored by Ronan MacDonald in The Death of the Critic: “So the public critic has been dismembered by two opposing forces: the tendency of academic criticism to become increasingly inward-looking and non-evaluative, and the moment for journalistic and popular criticism to become a much more democratic, dispersive affair, no longer left in the hands of the experts.”60 Here the three previously mentioned overlapping territories emerge once again: that of the academic or scholarly critic, the professional or popular critic, and the lay or public critic.

Writing in reference to literary criticism, but applicable to other forms of arts criticism, McDonald makes a desperate case for the return of the authoritative critic. For McDonald, the professional popular critic is needed in order for educated value judgements to be made as, “Unavoidably, the critic occupies a hierarchical role: someone who knows more about an art form than we do, whose opinion or

59 Ibid, 62
60 Ronan McDonald, The Death of the Critic, (Bloomsbury Academic: Unknown, 2007), ix
interpretation is worthy of special regard."\textsuperscript{61} However, the concern arises as, this hierarchical role of the critic has, “fallen victim to the wider shifts in social relations, away from deference and authority. Evaluation of the arts has been dispersed, beauty emphatically ascribed to the ‘eye of the beholder’, not the expert critic or the aesthetcian."\textsuperscript{62} As such, for McDonald, the critic can no longer play a vital or even critical role, if they do not also hold absolute authority over the public, as a result of their perceived expertise.

This is also in light of McDonald’s understanding that the critic is often seen as an elitist and authoritarian figure, especially in an age of great resistance to such forms of governance, and where ‘people power’ is acting as the new dominate force. This shift in the value given to evaluative judgement-making is also attributed by McDonald to what he sees as the growing division between academic and popular criticism. Yet for McDonald, this does not signal a clear divide, but rather an opportunity for overlap, where a more academically grounded criticism could be made more accessible to the public, and in turn, create a new role for the popular critic (one who writes for a popular audience, rather than being lay in their own knowledge).

McDonald further states, however that “healthy public criticism has often involved close connections between the academic study of the arts and wider reviewing of culture. Though academics still write for newspapers, the intellectual connections have

\textsuperscript{61} McDonald, The Death of the Critic, vii
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, vii
significantly diminished. Even if one person undertakes both roles, reviewers and university professors are engaged in significantly different tasks.”63 Thus, while McDonald can see the potential of a more scholarly mainstream criticism, he sees little ability for it to take root or for there to be a critic could straddle this divide. Ultimately for McDonald, however, the fact that there are too many critical voices for one to know who to pay attention to64 has brought about a loss of authority for the critic, and thus a resulted in a state of crisis.

Speaking specifically to architecture and architecture critics, Trevor Boddy’s “The Conundrums of Criticism” (2014), also recognizes the fact that even if critics are being pushed out of traditional channels and mediums of criticism, it has been difficult to even establish a presence to begin with, with only a handful of cities ever having employed one.65 In is paper, Boddy details the various histories and traditions that have led to the contemporary understandings of popular architecture criticism. This includes William Morris as activist and John Ruskin as moralist, as well as the more philosophical and art historical work of Kant to Heidegger, who together “produced theoretical texts and lyrical writings important to our current notions of interpreting and evaluating buildings.”66 Boddy believes these works “made for architectural criticism that validated architecture as an intellectually autonomous discipline, disengaging it from the moralizing and strategic concerns of the Morris-Ruskin tradition.” He continues, “At its

63 McDonald, The Death of the Critic, ix
64 Ibid, vii, 4
66 Boddy, “The Conundrums of Criticism,” 142
best, this writing is conceptually rigorous and unbenheld to the distractions of the time and place of its creation, but at its worst, it can be pretentious philosophizing or pointless formal analysis.”67

Boddy believes that this is the criticism that lives on in the academy, under the inaccurate title of theory, but that likewise, evaluative and contemporary criticism which deals with active practice, currently has little to no place within the schools of architecture. This is due to the fact that theoretical criticism is largely confined to academic study, with little effect on architecture outside of the design studio.

The need for such a critic and criticism – one that can lead to an influence through knowledge – is later summarized when Boddy states, “As architecture critics, we are developing global publics but are less and less able, in the William Morris manner, to shape events and built culture close to home. We need another Ruskin – able to write simultaneously to specialist and general publics. And it is this importance of architecture criticism’s lack of ability to shape architecture, in light of the role architecture plays in shaping much of our lives, is in fact the conundrum.

ii. A Democratization: Everybody’s a Critic

In the season 19 episode of the adult-oriented animated show South Park, “You’re Not Yelping”, which aired on October 14, 2015, the phenomenon of online reviews, such as

67 Ibid, 142
those on the Yelp (a website and app for business reviews that are crowd-sourced by customers, and which can greatly affect the success of a company), is explored as the main character takes on the role of an amateur food critic via their Yelp reviewer status. Business owners are seen to be catering to the reviewer, who uses the threat of a one-star review to receive free food, despite having no culinary credentials. During this opening scene, another couple comes into the restaurant who also share that they too are Yelp reviewers, to which the main character responds, “Oh God, everyone thinks they’re a food critic.”

This idea, that anyone with access to the internet can critique a restaurant, or building, with little to no education or training, is at the heart of the concerns over the democratization of criticism and the concept that “Everybody’s a Critic” or that the public can more readily take on the role of the lay critic.

This idea has raised concerns for the authority of the critic as explored in the author’s previously cited paper titled, “Critical Criticism: A Loss of Criticalities in Popular Architecture Criticism”:

[However, as the] critic is, by its history if not by its very nature, meant to be a voice of authority; an arbiter [of taste], an expert in their field, and a discerning individual for the masses. It was, thus, a telling question when French philosopher Bruno Latour asked what has become of criticism when, “everyone is the critic, whether educated as such or not, whether informed or

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68 South Park, “You’re Not Yelping,” (Season 19, Episode 4, October 14, 2015)
69 Michael Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities (New York: Verso, 2011), 263
uninformed or, worse, ill informed?"70 [...] This led to author Ronan McDonald making that observation that it is therefore strangely ironic for us to be speaking of the critic as if dead, “when everybody now seems to be one [...and when] everyone has an opinion and one opinion is ‘as good as another.’”71

These conflicting opinions on the singularity and absoluteness of the critic’s authority begin to ask questions of who is the rightful adjudicator of architecture; a judge or a jury, the specialist or the enthusiasts, the autocratic individual or the democratic mainstream? Yet however plentiful the judges may be, there is still an obvious need to evaluate the authority of the critic within, and of, themselves. For Sorkin this means that a critic “should arrive on the scene with a quiver full of her own values and take her best shot, not be a conduit for someone else’s delusions.”72 This is then in keeping with Attoe’s concern that most critics are often only employed part-time, and many with no formal training in architecture, leading to “vague credentials,”73 and a resulting lack of the prerequisite knowledge required for such authority.

Yet as also noted in the paper, “Architecture Criticism vs. The Public: ‘Mirvish+Gehry Toronto’ A Case Study”, presented by the author at the First International Workshop of

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71 MacDonald, Death of the Critic, 4
72 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 147-148
73 Attoe, Architectural and Critical Imagination, xvi, xii
The democratization of popular architectural criticism has recently become a topic of pointed discussion within the mainstream architectural media, with academic publications also beginning to look at the phenomenon within criticism as a whole. Most influential in the debates, however, has been the shift towards new media, in particular internet-based entities such as blogs and social media platforms, and away from traditional print sources. The related concerns have most greatly been in regards to a potential lessening of the rigour, accountability and editorial control of such critique, as well as a resultant decrease in the perceived authority of the professional critic. However, the notion of a democratized critical field has also been recognized for its lack of restrictive censorship and ability to more greatly share ideas.

According to Omar Akbar, “A political public that has an ‘institutionalized capacity to criticize’ is one of the core elements of the democratic idea,” however, “it would be easy to say that even the greatest democracies experience difficulties in bringing forth a ‘critical public.’” For cultural historian and art critic Maurice Berger, the relationship between...
democratization and criticality means that while anyone with access to the internet can now act as a “lay” critic, this does not mean that their judgment is inherently wrong or, reversely, that the professional critic is always “insightful.” For these reasons, Sorkin states that, while most decisions pertaining to architecture and urban planning are made by those in a position of power or expertise, “reacting belongs to the people.”

Thus the democratization of criticism, and architecture criticism in particular, can lead to greater accessibility of shared knowledge and option, a larger readership and thus opportunity to create a more informed and engaged public, and ultimately more critical minds and voices to push for influence or change.

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78 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 4
79 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 32
CHAPTER 2: State of the Art: Established Theories of Popular Architecture Criticism

Sections
   I. Introduction
   II. Peter Collins – *Architectural Judgement* (1971) – Criticism as Judgement
   IV. Michael Sorkin – *All Over the Map* (2013) – Criticism as Social Advocacy
   V. Synthesis

I. Introduction

This chapter will explore the established theories of popular architecture criticism in order to determine their value for an analysis of contemporary practice, within the context of a democratized media landscape. Theorists to be studied include Peter Collins (criticism as judgement), Wayne Attoe (criticism as behaviour), and Michael Sorkin (criticism as advocacy / activism / action).

A significant discovery in undertaking this research is the paucity of academic consideration or attention paid to the practice of popular architecture criticism. Peter Collins’ text *Architectural Judgement* (1971) and Wayne Attoe’s *Architecture and Critical Imagination* (1978) remain the only fully-dedicated scholarly texts on architecture criticism that begin to approach the topic of popular criticism—and the role of the popular critic—within a theoretical framework. These theorists, therefore, form the basis for the academic grounding from which the theoretical analysis of this research is situated. Lastly, the late, contemporary architect, critic and theorist Michael Sorkin’s sentiments on the socially responsible nature of popular criticism are explored.
II. Peter Collins: *Architectural Judgement*¹

Professor and architectural historian Peter Collins is today considered to be one of the most influential scholars on the theories of architecture criticism and judgement. His text *Architectural Judgement* (1971) is recognized as a seminal text on the forms of architecture criticism that exist outside of academic consideration.² This is noted by Stead who states that, “The work of Peter Collins has also consistently placed architecture criticism within a larger understanding of judgement in architecture.”³

The premise of Collins’ text is set up as a comparison between legal and architectural judgements. He argues that as both law and architecture are professional practices, there must be similarities in how judgements are made. This comparative study thus uses the theories and philosophies of law (jurisprudence) in relation to those of architecture, in order to ground the judgement of architecture criticism and to help establish on what merit architecture should be evaluated.

While little direct attention is paid to the notion of the popular critic, who Collins refers to as a journalist with little influence to create impact⁴, the text presents an overarching sense of the architect’s obligation to society. The judgement of architecture is seen as a means to help ensure the best possible outcome. Collins states, “The best critic is the

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² Naomi Stead, “Criticism in/and/of crisis” *Critical Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 76
³ Stead, “Criticism in/and/of crisis” *Critical Architecture*, 77
⁴ Collins, *Architectural Judgement*, 147
user, but the architect is ultimately the expert.”\textsuperscript{5} Collins also notes that while architectural judgements are by their nature more subjective than those pertaining to the law, there can be objective critiques of architecture when dealing with measurable concerns such as building health and safety and code considerations.

In ‘Part One: The Analysis of Professional Judgement’, Collins identifies and analyzes six processes and contexts of judgement that he considers requirements of professional judgement: judgement as an evolutionary process, judgement as a rational process, the environmental context of judgement, the political context of judgement, the procedural context of judgement, and the context of precedent.

When defining judgement as an \textit{evolutionary process}, Collins focuses on the difference between history and precedent, as concerns their legal and architectural implications. This leads to the understanding that a judicial or architectural decision should be considered as precedent if it is still relevant today,\textsuperscript{6} regardless of when it was initially decided or built. For if an action or decision was “rationally justifiable” before, and would still be relevant today regardless of any time elapsed, then it should be seen as precedent and not history.\textsuperscript{7} Yet for Collins, precedent and originality in architecture are not mutually exclusive, as there can be creativity found within the ways one uses precedents to bring about a justifiable solution to a novel architectural problem.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{5} Collins, \textit{Architectural Judgement}, 169-170
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, 17
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, 18
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 25
According to Collins, “Society is cheated if architectural design is treated like painting and sculpture, whereby the artist is ultimately to be regarded as the sole judge as to whether or not his creation is right.”\(^9\) Thus no architect should be above professional critique or placement within the evolutionary process of architecture history and precedent as, “A famous architect is expected to produce great buildings; but his fame cannot, and certainly should not, automatically confer greatness upon them.”\(^10\)

Defining architectural judgement as a \textit{rational process}, Collins next details how rationality must be made use of in any form of professional judgement. For while any opinion can be considered to be a rational judgement, “professional judgements in architecture […] are] sober and sensitive critical assessments of the total quality of a building envisaged as a synthesis of every aspect of its design.” Collins notes that these types of thoroughly grounded and well-rounded assessments are “rarely put into writing.”\(^11\)

For Collins, however, this chapter on rational judgement is mainly in reference to the architect’s own internal judgement during the design phase, as opposed to that of the critic’s on the completed work. This leads to a discussion over the differences between the meanings of ‘to reason’ and ‘to rationalize’\(^12\), as well as that of ‘rational’ being the

\(^9\) Collins, \textit{Architectural Judgement}, 33  
\(^10\) Ibid, 35  
\(^11\) Ibid, 36  
\(^12\) Ibid, 39
accumulated reasons for a specific judgement or decision. According to Collins, architects design first through inspiration, and then rationalize the design according to the needs of the project.\textsuperscript{13} Thus it is the assertion of this thesis that the critic’s role should be to see past the rationalization of the architect to the evidentiary reasons and merits of the design decisions, in order to make a judgement based on reason and not rationalization.

This leads to Collins’ understanding of the \textit{environmental context} of judgement. In doing so, he begins to shift the focus from the internal judgement of the architect to the role of the critic. For Collins, ‘context’ is to be understood as the physical and/or economic, political, procedural (process of design), and historical (other buildings of the same typology or designed by the same architect) factors that a project is situated within. Collins states, “Of more immediate relevance […] would be the maxim (here submitted for consideration) that it is impossible to design or criticize a building adequately unless the designer or critic is familiar with the site.” He continues, “I contend that it is inconceivable that a journalist can write an adequate criticism of a major building during a single brief visit, especially if he has never visited the environment before.”\textsuperscript{14}

For Collins, the idea of context is as equally important for the critic as it is for the architect. Here he makes reference to architecture critic Lewis Mumford’s “Skyline” column in \textit{The New Yorker}. Mumford paid great attention to the physical context of any

\textsuperscript{13} Collins, \textit{Architectural Judgement}, 40
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 51
project under his consideration. More generally speaking, Collins also notes that “there is the political context, ranging from statutory zoning restrictions to all the various political pressures which can be exerted on an architect to force him to design in one way rather than another.” In this way, Collins continues to stress the need for a criticism that goes beyond aesthetic concerns to include larger processes and context that play into an architectural project at stages of the design decision-making process.

Moving from the more general context of environment to the more specific political context of architecture and its related judgements, Collins next outlines his definition of the “political control of urban and rural environments,” and the formation of architectural policy. Collins states, “It must be clear that any study concerned with architectural judgement must consider the term ‘politics’ in its widest sense, as meaning the governmental controls which influence, or should influence, such judgements.” In stating such, Collins gives credence to the need to explore the larger forces at play on an architectural project.

Increasingly shifting from the judgement of the architect to the judgement of the critic, Collins next makes the assertion that “The procedural context of architectural judgement seldom receives the attention from architectural critics which it deserves, because the traditions of art-criticism, despite much scholarly research into the

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15 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 51
16 Ibid, 50
17 Ibid, 63
18 Ibid, 64
procedural evolution of great works of painting and sculpture, places all the emphasis on the final product. In architecture, the conclusive importance of final results would be indisputable if their procedural context had only a negative influence.”

He continues, “But the issue here is not the extent to which mastery of procedural techniques helps or hinders satisfactory solutions; it is whether procedures form, or do not form, an integral part of the creative process; because if they do, they must necessarily be included among the criteria by which any professional art is judged.”

This is summarized in the claim that regardless of whatever else architectural design may be considered to be, it cannot be questioned that it is a process. For Collins this leads to the question of whether or not a finished building can be judged, without first studying the processes and decisions which led to its final design. He further explains that no matter how ‘genius’ the architect, buildings are rarely if ever designed from beginning to end in one solution; rather there are various iterations of the design, some thrown away, with others leading in various ways to the final design. It is these decision points, and the factors that go into making them, that are important for the critic to consider when evaluating the final product of design, according to Collins.

19 Collins, *Architectural Judgement*, 78
20 Ibid, 78
21 Ibid, 78
22 Ibid, 87
Collins thus declares that the process of architectural design is inseparable from the final product. What is most novel, however, is Collins’ noting of the scientific terminology of ‘feed-back’ loops, and his relating of this concept to that of architectural decision-making (i.e. that feedback is a continual part of the design process, and thus must be explored critically as well). He also explores the parallel and intimate relationships between the process of building and that of financing such buildings in regards to large-scale projects, and the statement made by a “distinguished Canadian architect” that these types of project, “can only be built if experts in all three aspects of building [...] join together, from the very beginning, as professional members of the design.” Yet these types of relationships, and the influence they have over the final product of design, are rarely investigated, let alone recorded in writing or shared with the general public.

This need to understand and analyze process is taken further to include the need to look at process models and drawings. Collins states, “The possibility of taking such studies into account when judging a finished building is at present remote, since limitations of storage space [...] usually prompt an architect to jettison all his preparatory studies once the final project has been decided upon.” He then laments this lack of possible study due to the fact that, “the pedagogical value of assessing final projects in conjunction with preparatory studies is now widely recognized,” while “journalists and historians,

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23 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 80
24 Ibid, 80
25 Ibid, 79
26 Ibid, 87
faced with the task of architectural assessments, are inevitably frustrated by the need to deal with this problem." Collins acknowledges this concern stating that, “If extensive preparatory studies still exist, they can provide the material for a useful doctoral thesis; but few editors are prepared to make space available for publishing them.” This suggests a dichotomy between the need for more a fully researched and long-form popular criticism, despite the lack of editorial interest in most popular publications.

Collins concludes the first section by combining the above forms of professional judgement – ones that should be seen as objective areas of investigation and evaluation – through the context of precedent. He summarizes these judgements as “the only guides we have to making judgements of law and judgements of taste,” and restates the need for judgements of architecture to take into account all aspects, influences, and factors of an architectural design, as well as the processes which led to the decisions made by the architects. For it is only within this understanding that a fair, rational, and grounded critique can be made, according to Collins.

The second section of Collins’ Architectural Judgement moves from the analysis to the synthesis of profession judgement in ‘Part Two: The Synthesis of Professional Judgement’. Here he defines the value of six criteria for judgement including: scientific criteria, artistic criteria, professional criteria, the laws of architecture, affinities between architectural and legal judgement, and ideals of judgement.

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27 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 87
28 Ibid, 87
29 Ibid, 104
According to Collins, while discussing the value of scientific criteria, it was not until the 1950’s that the ground on which architecture is critiqued was seriously questioned. Prior to this time, aesthetic considerations, such as those that governed proportions or ornamentation, and as expressed in the foundational treatises of architecture, where the grounds on which buildings were judged.\(^{30}\) This shift was marked by more objective and scientific methods of judgments of architecture such as building performance evaluation, however, this is balanced by Collins who notes the fact that architecture is both a science and an art, and thus needs both rational and scientific judgement, as well as sentimental and artistic evaluation, which need not be contradictory.\(^{31}\)

Collins then notes that, “In contrast to the legal profession (where the distinction between judges and advocates is clearly defined) or the medical profession (where the interests of the public and those of individual patients seldom conflict), architects find themselves in an embarrassingly ambiguous situation when called upon to make judgements in the public interest.”\(^{32}\) However, it is this impact on the public that separates architecture from other forms of arts criticism and results in professional associations and liabilities— making it more akin to law and medicine than art.

The subjective nature of the architect’s artistic license, and the related need for objective judgement however, is explained by the fact that, “Whilst we may all agree

\(^{30}\) Collins, Architectural Judgement, 107-108 \\
^{31}\) Collins 118-119 \\
^{32}\) Collins 125
that true architecture should be ‘expressive’ [...] few architectural theorists would agree [...] that architecture is an individual matter purely between the architect and his artistic conscience.”33 This lays the groundwork for Collins’ call for a socially-minded criticism that, while respecting the artistic freedom of the architect as the author of architecture, looks at the larger scope and impact of a project. He continues, “Architectural integrity can no longer be identified (assuming that it ever was) with expression of the individual architect’s personality, untrammelled either by the needs of society or by the needs of a client as he conceives them, to the extent that an architect’s self-loyalty becomes his supreme moral code.”34 This statement, while pointedly accusatory of architects who could be considered to at the extreme ends of formalism, can also be understood to apply to any project that puts aesthetics ahead of context, the environment, or the user and larger community.

Next speaking to the professional criteria of judgement, Collins continues to make the case for architectural judgement, or criticism, as a form of professional judgement (as opposed to a form of art criticism). He notes that while architectural judgement cannot be considered synonymous to legal or medical judgements, which are extremely objective in nature, and that while architectural critique often deals with aesthetic or formal concerns, there are aspects of architecture that need to be considered through professional criteria for judgement.35 Collins considers the two polarities of architectural judgement to be ‘professional’ judgements and ‘aesthetic’ judgements, and contends

33 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 140-141
34 Ibid, 141
35 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 142-143
that, “the essential difference between [the two] cannot be that one is simple and mechanical, whilst the other is complex and intuitive.”36

This results in Collins’ attempt to formalize the categories or forms of architectural judgement, being: (1) the design process (2) competitive assessment (3) control evaluations (4) journalism.

It is in the first category that Collins believes that architectural decision-making happens within, as the architect is the one who is constantly making decisions and judgements as to the direction of the project.37 As such, for Collins, it is at the opposite end of influence that architectural journalism acts, or rather, does not act, but is situated. According to Collins, “At the opposite extreme is architectural criticism in its journalistic sense; an activity which, despite its many merits, may be regarded as the antithesis of design.”38 Collins’ disdain for this form of architectural judgement, while only briefly mentioned in the text, is sharply focused on the inability for architectural journalism (popular criticism) to have any influence over the process of architectural decision-making. He continues, “Whether enunciated by architects, art historians or laymen, it can have no possible effect on the building under review. It may educate the public. It may publicize the architect, ulcerate the client or help overthrow the municipal government. But its immediate influence on the environment is nil.”39

36 Ibid, 144
37 Ibid, 146-7
38 Ibid, 147
39 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 147
As noted in the author’s forthcoming publication, *Critical Influence: The Influence of the Popular Architecture Critic on Architectural Decision-Making*, for the ‘International Conference on Architectural Criticism’, this perceived lack of ability for popular criticism to impact architecture, and understanding that, “Whatever it creates, it creates for the future,” is then illustrated by a reference to the 1968 cartoon by Alan Dunn, and published in *The New Yorker*. Collins explains, “the most sagacious evaluation of this kind of judgement was probably the cartoon published in a recent issue of the *New Yorker* where a workman, assembling the foundation steelwork of a sky-scraper, remarks laconically to his mate: ‘I see in *The Times* that Ada Louise Huxtable already dislikes it.’” This reading of the cartoon that the building will be, and is being, constructed as planned, despite Huxtable’s objections, is meant to fully emphasize Collins’ view of its ineffective nature.

Collins goes on to overlook most aspects of journalistic or popular criticism, however, and discusses competitive assessment and control evaluations as the two forms of architectural judgement most important to the design process. For, “Unlike journalistic criticism, they both play a decisive rôle with respect to the environment under immediate consideration.”

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40 Ibid, 147
41 Ibid, 147
42 Ibid, 147
In the chapter on the *laws of architecture*, Collins again returns to the architect’s artistic license and need for larger societal concerns and values to be taking into account. He asks, “Is an architect absolutely free to create anything whatsoever which comes into his mind, provided it is not expressly forbidden by Building Codes or Zoning Ordinances? Or is he limited in some additional way, and if so, why and how?” 43 This is then countered by Collins with the statement that, “architectural criticism is not primarily concerned with the artist’s own private purpose but with his obligations towards society.” 44 For Collins, it is therefore the role of the critic to evaluate what is built outside of the possibly less-than-objective, and highly biased motives of the architect or client. He once again asserts that architectural judgement is more akin to legal judgement or the aesthetics of art-criticism, 45 due to the fact that while context (i.e. the site) is important to architecture, the same is not always true for art, and that both architecture and laws serve tangible purposes, uses, and a rational basis, while art does not necessarily do so. 46

Lastly, in the concluding chapter *The ideals of judgement*, Collins explores both the concept of ideals, as well as the differences between professional and public, or lay, criticism. While these are not the specific areas of focus for this research, Collins overlays them to make one more scorching attack on popular criticism.

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43 Collins, *Architectural Judgement*, 154
44 Ibid, 165
45 Ibid, 171
46 Ibid, 179
He states, “Whatever the cause, and however altruistic the motives of those who thus take it upon themselves to fight the good fight against urban blight, it seems doubtful whether acrimonious exchanges in the public press help architects to fulfill their responsibilities to the general public.” He then softens his approach, however, reiterating: “This is not to deprecate. On the contrary, it has already been emphasized more than once that serious criticism, based on questions of principle, is the indispensable condition of professional progress.” This equal part critique and lament over the current state of architecture criticism, and that which takes places within the popular press more specifically, can been seen throughout Collins’ attempt to create a theory of architectural judgement.

III. Wayne Attoe: *Architecture and Critical Imagination* 

Wayne Attoe, and his text *Architecture and Critical Imagination* (1978), is still considered to be the most important text on popular architecture criticism, following in the legacy of Collins’ *Architectural Judgement*. This is supported by Stead’s claim that Attoe’s writing is “the most comprehensive and significant text on architectural criticism” and “remains a highly useful [...] reference point.”

Writing seven years after Collins, the professor of architecture continues to explore the grounds on which architecture can and should be judged, while taking a different approach to theorizing architecture criticism. Attoe focuses on the methods and tools of

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47 Collins, *Architectural Judgement*, 206  
49 Stead, “Criticism in/and/of crisis” *Critical Architecture*, 77
criticism, and suggests that criticism should be seen as *behaviour* rather than *final judgement*.

Attoe first approached the topic of architecture criticism in his paper entitled “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism” published in 1976. In this essay, Attoe outlines his thoughts on the significance of criticism, and questions whether criticism could be a “key to excellence in professional work,” rather than simply, “newspaper filler” or “heady entertainment.” This opening question establishes Attoe’s focus on more popular forms of architecture criticism than that of Collins. In addition, asserts that criticism, as currently practiced, is not effective.

As noted previously, for Attoe the etymology of the word criticism, relating to terms such as “separating, sifting, [and] making distinctions,” implies the need for criticism to be discerning, as opposed to solely judgmental. Judgements of architecture can be neutral, positive, and even descriptive. Attoe also places focus on critics themselves, explaining that the inherent biases of a critic are important to be aware of, as all beings have, “underlying motives, fears, intentions and habits,” that influence our judgement and behaviour.

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50 Wayne Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism” JAE (April 1976), 21
51 Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism”, 20-21
52 Ibid, 20
53 Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism”, 20
54 Ibid, 20
There are many similarities between Collins and Attoe. For example, Attoe shares the belief that criticism should consider the architectural processes and context with as great of care as the final building. He states, “We do not need architecture critics [...] but environmental and urban critics. Buildings should not be treated as isolated objects.”

Attoe also works to distinguish what he refers to as ‘environmental criticism’ (i.e. architecture criticism that considers its larger urban context) from literary and art criticism. He states, “What is special about environmental criticism is that it can have an effect on the future. Decisions about the environment are much more in and about the public realm, and the public realm is sensitive to influence”.

Here Attoe focuses the gaze of criticism towards the future in a forward-looking manner. He states, “To capitalize on this unique feature of environmental criticism, the critic should emphasize what is in the future and should not be satisfied with categorical judgements about the past. Content of the critique should focus on how events in the present can teach us better how to handle the future.” Attoe then summarizes his writing by stating that the ultimate aim for criticism is that of “purposeful response”.

This short text from 1976, led to Attoe’s polemic Architecture and Critical Imagination in 1978, where he works to organize the forms, categories, methods, tools and tactics of criticism, in light of the above understanding of criticism as both behaviour and

55 Ibid, 21
56 Ibid, 21
57 Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism”, 21
58 Ibid, 21
purposeful response towards the built environment. Here Attoe’s claim that “Architecture criticism has received little attention as a discipline...” before suggesting that, “the reason architecture criticism has failed to develop as a major and widespread endeavour is that for the most part efforts at criticism have been inconsequential.”\(^{59}\) Attoe claims this is due to the fact that “critics, in the conventional, narrow use of the term, have made few identifiable contributions to our understanding of the environment and, more importantly, to improving it.”\(^{60}\)

Attoe’s survey of criticism and its various methods also works to place emphasis on popular criticism, citing Huxtable’s work for the *New York Times*, and within the academic setting of design studios, as the most established and significant settings for criticism, despite little attention being given to the former within scholarly research.\(^{61}\) However, Attoe’s approach to criticism is much more far reaching, for he considers any interaction or response to the built environment or architecture to be a form of criticism as behaviour. As such, for Attoe, “Instead of just the once-a-week diatribes—more often, review—in the newspaper or magazine by someone with vague credentials [...] criticism is something all of us are engaged in much of the time. Rather than a narrow, exclusive activity, the province of the *cognoscenti*, criticism is an on-going collection of diverse behaviour.”\(^{62}\) In this sense, criticism is opened up from the exclusive domain of the judgemental critic, to the inclusive field of the engaged public.

\(^{59}\) Attoe, *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, xi

\(^{60}\) Ibid, xi

\(^{61}\) Attoe, *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, xi, xi

\(^{62}\) Ibid, xii
Attoe next explains that architecture critics have come to be ineffective due to their responses largely coming after the design, and more often, the construction phase of a project. Yet, as “criticism will always be more useful when it informs the future than when it scores the past,”\(^{63}\) he makes the suggestion that critics need to shift towards challenging policy issues in order to better attempt to influence the built environment before it has been designed and/or built. Thus, “Architecture criticism, generally, but especially within the popular press, has typically failed to look forward, to attempt to influence current decisions to effect a more tolerable future. If there is a message here it is that critics ought to be more political and less politic.”\(^{64}\) This is significant in terms of its recognition of the potential for popular criticism to become active, as this pushes the boundaries for the profession past those previously set by Collins.

This call for a more political criticism is allied with Attoe’s intention to “shake the limited conception of architecture criticism as short, popular or semi-popular article and thick, unpopular essays, and to suggest that environmental design and the education of designers would be improved if we gave more attention to criticism as it appears everywhere around us and did not leave it to newspapers.”\(^{65}\)

Attoe next begins to divide the practice of criticism into ‘settings for criticism’, with those being: self-criticism, the authoritative setting, expert criticism, peer criticism, and

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\(^{63}\) Ibid, xii
\(^{64}\) Ibid, xv
\(^{65}\) Attoe, *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, xi xix
lay criticism. And it is the ‘setting’ of the expert criticism that must be explored in relation to the study of popular architecture criticism. For while Attoe expresses concern for the restraints of the popular critic, as one often confined to very short word counts, hired part-time, and possessing little special training or expertise,\textsuperscript{66} he implies that the expert critic must make an impact through “impressing others with his specialized knowledge and insights.” For as, “The expert must be convincing while the authority figure’s power lies in his position.”\textsuperscript{67} Therefore, the expert critic needs to be influential in not only asserting their own position and authority, but also in bringing about change through their critical practice.

The popular critic loses much of their credibility, according to Attoe, due to the fact that there are currently two forms of writing that can appear in the popular press under the authorship of critics. These include critical opinions or columns, in addition to “pseudo-news” stories or re-written press releases that are more promotional than critical in nature.\textsuperscript{68} This blurs the important lines between architectural journalism, marketing and criticism, and weakens the critic’s position or ability to affect change.

In summary, Attoe’s conception of architectural criticism opens up Collins’ understanding of architectural judgement to be more popular and inclusive. For Attoe, criticism must first be seen to be “concerned with evaluating, interpreting and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid, xvi
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 129
\item \textsuperscript{68} Attoe, \textit{Architecture and Critical Imagination}, xi, 140
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
describing,“ with the assumption that we can only begin to understand a building if we first know all factors that went into its formation. However, for Attoe, it is important for popular architecture criticism to attempt to look forward and influence change. He states:

“While much criticism can be characterized as informative, most of it comes after the fact and hence probably does not influence subsequent decisions; the building is already designed [...] when the critic gets to it. Criticism which focuses on process rather than fabric will perhaps be more effective in encouraging change, for when we know how buildings come about, how they are changed, how they are demolished, we can imagine intervening in the process.”

This speaks to the need for popular architecture criticism to become more active in its methods. Attoe also sees the exchange between legislators and the profession, among other relationships, as possible moments of criticality, and that, “Architects, planners and policy-makers need to know how successful previous decisions were made so that future decisions might be influenced.”

Attoe later states, “The ends of criticism should be beginnings. If criticism does not have a forward looking bias it will be of little use and in fact of only passing interest. After-

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69 Ibid, 8
70 Ibid, 86
71 Attoe, Architecture and Critical Imagination, xi, 97
72 Ibid, 2
the-fact, harangues and gushes of approval mean little if they do not relate to future issues, future problems, and aspirations for the future."\(^{73}\) This recognition of the potential for popular criticism to be able to affect or help resolve future problems works to lay the groundwork for a continued relevance for popular criticism. Further “It is the possibility of being forward-looking that in fact distinguishes architecture criticism from much art and literary criticism”\(^{74}\)

With Collins, Attoe stresses the necessity of reviewing and assessing the entire architectural process—from design through construction. Attoe explains, “The one crucial shortcoming of architecture criticism as we know it is that it does not show us the processes whereby building-events occur [...] Criticism oriented to the future, to the physical environment that is in the making, would appear much more purposeful than most criticism which tends to focus on buildings that are already built and decisions that are already made, and draw few if any relationships to the future.”\(^{75}\) This once again works to build the argument that criticism needs to move from reactive to instructive. Attoe underlines this: “Unless architecture criticism develops a more purposeful bent, it will remain a peripheral and, for the most part, ineffective endeavour.”\(^{76}\) He continues, “What is needed now is to do criticism, or to continue doing it more aggressively and with more conviction.”\(^{77}\) This is due to the fact that, “Though perhaps not as colourful as other causes, the quality of the man-made environment and our response to it still

\(^{73}\) Ibid, 163  
\(^{74}\) Ibid, 163  
\(^{75}\) Ibid, 165-166  
\(^{76}\) Attoe, *Architecture and Critical Imagination*, xi, 165-166  
\(^{77}\) Ibid, 165-166  
\(^{77}\) Ibid, 167
mattered.” It is this understanding of the social and environmental potential of popular architecture criticism that will carry through into the theories of Michael Sorkin.

IV. Michael Sorkin: All Over the Map

Acting as a contemporary source for the thesis, and continuing in the stream of Collins’ and Attoe’s considerations of popular architecture criticism, Sorkin brings great insight into the need for popular criticism, and its critics, to become active, democratic, and political. According to Sorkin, in his article “Critical Measure”, “Architecture is never not political, given both its economic stakes and its commitment to setting social life.” This is due to Sorkin’s understanding of architecture as a “service profession”, being a profession that works to better the lives of its users and community, and that its related criticism must therefore be practical in its application. As a result of this, Sorkin does not see a ‘one-size’ or ‘one-theory’ fits-all understanding of criticism, believing that different forms serve different purposes. However, what must remain consistent among these possible forms is that, “It is not sufficient for criticism merely to note that things change, our task is to influence the change.” And from this, a theory of active criticism begins to emerge.

Here Sorkin echoes both Collins and Attoe by placing the blame of ability for criticism to create change on the fact that architecture critics often, “arrive on the scene too late,

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78 Ibid, xii
81 Sorkin, “Critical Measure”, 35
82 Ibid, 38
giving their useless thumbs up or thumbs down to some zillion dollar pile on which their opinions will have not the slightest impact.”\textsuperscript{83} Yet unlike Collins, and even in some regards Attoe, Sorkin defends the profession of architecture criticism as he continues, “I don’t mean to trivialize either the function or the concept of criticism but — just like architecture — it must also be judged by its effects [...] and it is precisely the critic’s mission to help vet the instigation of the social and formal parameters of building.”\textsuperscript{84}

This notion that criticism must be “judged by its effects” essentially indicates a need for criticism to be effective. And if it is not only the formal, but also the social parameters of building that architecture criticism must effect, it must be social and/or political in nature.

Sorkin also believes that the future of criticism must see the critic’s ‘critical gaze’ be applied to situations where “the stakes are real,” as opposed to only acting as literary entertainment.\textsuperscript{85} This is in addition to the need to avoid the ‘distractions’ of academic theory, in favour of the real urgencies that architecture needs to address, such as the environment, through \textit{performative} judgements.\textsuperscript{86}

According to Sorkin, “The challenge for criticism is not simply to acknowledge the political but to struggle to infuse the practice of architecture with the means for

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 51
\item \textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 51-52
\item \textsuperscript{85} Sorkin, “Critical Measure”, 53
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 37
\end{footnotes}
understanding and incorporating progressive social values. And it is this case for architecture’s social and political potential, and related ability to create change that is the foundation of Sorkin’s social understanding of both architecture and architecture criticism. Sorkin later continues, “Criticism must play a role both in advocating for the most expansive ideas of artistic self-expression and human possibility and in making ardent arguments through which to expand, refine, and acquire real outcomes for real people.” However, what is most important to note here is that within Sorkin’s idea of a political criticism, there is room for both advocacy, in terms of the subjective artistic nature of architecture, as well as political action, in regards to the more objective nature of the users experience and relation to architecture.

As such, Sorkin can be considered to be a political, environmental and social critic of architecture. This is most clearly evident in All Over the Map, which brings together many of his articles pertaining to, and protesting against, the architecture and landscape design for the rebuilding of Ground Zero. The text creates a record of Sorkin’s writing and its in-depth, political nature, noting that, “This work has also informed my writing, which has tried to balance the claims of social justice with the unassailable specificities of taste.” Here he again states that he also sees his writing as an act of advocacy, noting his “deep desire to live and work in a world that’s decent, delightful, and beautiful. A world where everyone has the right to architecture.”

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87 Ibid, 54
88 Ibid, 54
89 Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities, XVII
90 Ibid, XVII
Most significant to Sorkin’s view on (popular) architecture criticism, however, is his unquestioned conviction that if “all architecture is political,” the same must be true of architecture criticism. This is most clearly seen in his claim that, “The political aspect of criticism is engaged directly by the dire of the environment and architecture’s role in creating or curing it,” and the fact that, “The social is not the context of architecture but its substance.”

For Sorkin, it is the critic’s duty to both celebrate the artistic and qualitative merits of architecture, while still bringing light to the “nuances and systems” of its context and processes, as formal analysis cannot be separate from these other social, environmental, and/or political concerns. Yet Sorkin’s concept of the political nature of architecture criticism goes past the need to simply acknowledge and record the context and process of architecture, as both Collins and Attoe had previously discussed, but rather calls for a critical practice that actively involves itself within architectural decision-making, while also suggesting that the very political processes that influence architecture be opened up in order to present real alternatives. Sorkin explains, “While most planning, decision-making belongs to the powerful, reacting belongs to the people [...] Perhaps it is time for a little less management and a little more democracy.”

91 Ibid, 82
92 Ibid, 267
93 Ibid, 264
94 Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities, 266
95 Ibid, 32
Thus Sorkin defines the political duty or task of the critic as:

1. Protest: “Less to rise in defense of ‘architecture’ than to defend the planet from too much of it.”

2. Policy: “To fight for the renewal of the legal and conceptual frameworks of building to make sustainability as uncontroversial an element in architectural culture as sanitary plumbing, fire-safety, or seismic protection.”

3. Position / Possibilities: “[Define] a position with a context in which others [alternative to the solution] are also possible, and uses its tools argumentatively, to demonstrate the logic and consequences of a point.”

This understanding of the political potential of architecture criticism leads to a need to discuss Sorkin’s own view of the democratization of criticism. For Sorkin, however, this idea that “Everybody’s a Critic” is not novel or of concern, but rather a logical and important step in increasing and diversifying the critical voices needed to better our built environment. This includes the popular critic, and their need to play a more active role in architectural decision-making. For according to Sorkin, “Democracy is not simply a matter of being heard but of having the power to sway the course of events.”

This is an important distinction, for while the democratization of criticism has been faulted with weakening the significance of the popular critic, Sorkin distinguishes
between the ability to have ones voice heard, and its ability to create real change (Ironically, it can also be said that prior to the democratization of the press, popular critics still had little influence on the built environment). Sorkin also notes that in addition to the general democratization of the media, within architecture everyone is already a critic, as we all live and work within the built environment and “cannot escape its influence.”

Likewise, “You don’t need to be an architect to hit your head against the wall. Nor, one might add, to be a critic in order to shout ‘ouch!’”

Yet despite this, Sorkin remarks on the fact that (popular) critics are always quick to gather and lament over their “meager reach”.

However, he turns this around by suggesting that criticism is in fact “flourishing” and that one simply needs to, “identify, channel, and amplify its manifold messages.” This leads to Sorkin’s additional stance that architecture criticism can, and should, be as diverse as architecture itself, as the “interweaving of architecture with the social life that produces it [...] has produced the formal tradition of architectural commentary and critique, which dates back millennia, and assures us that it has always come from multiple perspectives and has been embodied in multiple discourses,” and that, “The task of criticism is surely not to ‘resolve’ this polyphony in a single approach but to enable more voices to be heard.”

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101 Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities, 263
102 Ibid, 264
103 Ibid, 264
104 Ibid, 264
105 Ibid, 265
106 Ibid, 265
Thus, the public’s increased critical voice should not be seen as a threat to the professional architecture critic, but rather as another opportunity for the critic to fulfill their duty of sharing the meanings of architecture with their audience, and thus help to empower readers through the giving of “analytical tool with which to the make the environment more comprehensible and tractable – to make the public more critical.”\textsuperscript{107} Ultimately for Sorkin, as a proponent of the politically active and democratic critic, “Architecture criticism is obliged to support the primary duty or architecture itself: making life better. This is the lamp that should illumine every building we make and every sentence we write.”\textsuperscript{108} And it is this statement that fully highlights Sorkin’s optimism for the potential architecture criticism, “a practice in which some form of advocacy must always be embedded.”\textsuperscript{109}

V. Synthesis

In summary, it is Collins’ call for journalistic or popular criticism to become more informed, contextual, investigative, and influential—to look at all aspects of a project and not only those of an aesthetic nature—that is of continued importance within the contemporary context of criticism. Collins also argues that architecture criticism needs to be understood as more in-line with professional judgements than with other forms of arts criticism, due to the societal and environmental impact of architecture and its impact on the public good – through the architects obligations to society, and the

\textsuperscript{107} Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities, 267
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 272
impact of buildings on its users and the planet. For these points are as pressing today as they were at the time of his writing.

Also, stemming from the notion that criticism can be based off of an understanding of expertise, as opposed to (potentially misplaced) authority, is Attoe’s democratic belief that, as any response to the built environment is an act of criticism, criticism should be seen as an “on-going collection of diverse behaviours” more than as an act judgment. 110 As such, Attoe sees no walls between critical, artistic, and scientific activity, but rather that all can be considered to be a “purposeful response.” 111 Therefore, whether it be photography, editorial cartoons, creative writing, film, graffiti, the knocking down of a wall, enacting of a new by-law, natural disaster, or war, there is an implicit critical commentary to be decoded by the critic. Attoe explains, “This criticism is best characterized as behaviour, human activity rather than a literary mode. It should be seen like other behaviours in relation to underlying motives, fears, intentions, and habits.” 112

This then brings about the concept of the ‘lay critic’ as being one who is not trained in the profession or study of architecture. 113 Attoe cites Charles Lozar (1974) who identifies four types of behaviour common to the layperson in response to architecture and urban environments. These include: attitudes towards, adoptive behaviour within,

110 Attoe, Architectural and Critical Imagination, xii
111 Ibid, xix
112 Ibid, 8
113 Ibid, 154-155
unintentional modifications of, and intentional modifications of the built environment.\textsuperscript{114} It is important to note, however, that while these are all still forms of existing criticism (if any response is to be considered an act of criticism), they most often require an expert to interpret what they mean. Additionally, with the advent of the internet, lay criticism now also often includes the online publishing of blogs, op-eds, editorials, and comments, along with clicks and likes, and online voting.

And for Sorkin, it is the simple but profound ideas that everyone is already a critic of architecture, living and interacting with it daily, that it is therefore the critic’s role to help create a more critical public, and that criticism, like architecture, has no higher aim that to better society and daily life, that encapsulate his theory of popular architecture criticism.

Ultimately, all three theorists agree that popular criticism needs to be forward-looking and change minded, in order to have impact, influence, and relevancy. Context and process of an architectural process also echoes throughout their writing. But what is most interesting to the work of this thesis is the increasing notion of the importance and power of the lay or public critic as we move from Collin’s sense of judgement, to Attoe’s behavioural approach, and ultimately Sorkin’s socially-minded and democratic ideas of popular criticism.

\textsuperscript{114} Attoe, \textit{Architectural and Critical Imagination}, 155

A summary and analysis of the 2016 POP // CAN // CRIT Symposium (project of architecture) to inform the contemporary discourse on popular architecture criticism and validate the findings of the thesis.

Sections
I. Introduction and Event Description
II. Panel Summaries
   i. Panel 1: Everyone’s a Critic: Democratization / popularization / authority / crisis
   ii. Panel 2: Lines Between: Academic / popular criticism (dividing lines / audiences)
   iii. Panel 3: New Media: The role of social media, e-publishing, + blogs
   iv. Panel 4: Criticism Looking Backwards: Criticism as an ongoing process
   v. Panel 5: Case Study: Mirvish + Gehry Toronto – The critical response
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III. Synthesis and Analysis

I. Introduction and Event Description

Preface

This chapter is a summary and analysis of the 2016 POP // CAN // CRIT: Current Conditions in Popular Architecture Criticism symposium. While written in the present tense, it is important to note that the content is from 2016. As such, some details may no longer be accurate, including some speakers and/or moderators no longer being in the same professional position.
The symposium also followed all ethics protocols, as set out by Carleton University’s Office of Research Ethics. This includes all required ethics consent and photo/audio release forms, in addition to the symposium being a public event.

Introduction

POP // CAN // CRIT: Current Conditions in Popular Architecture Criticism was held at the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism, Carleton University, on Friday, October 21, 2016. This one-day, SSHRC-funded event saw over a hundred people in attendance from across the country. Structured around six panel topics, with fourteen of the country’s leading critical architectural voices participating in the discussions, the symposium was an unprecedented occasion within Canada, bringing together the best in Canadian criticism to discuss the state of criticism itself.

The intention of the symposium was to gather together Canada’s leading critical voices, from both popular and academic contexts, to help bring attention to, examine, and debate the conditions currently facing architecture critics in Canada, as well as initiate a larger, more public discussion around the topic of popular architecture criticism. This was a first of its kind in terms of the topic and in-depth nature of the event, and resulted in both the confirmation of presupposed assumptions and research, as well opened up new areas for further research. Thus the findings from the symposium will be analyzed within this chapter.
Note: POP // CAN // CRIT (PCC) is an abbreviation of ‘popular Canadian criticism’, as it relates to architecture.

Speakers and Moderators*
- Matthew Blackett*: Spacing Magazine, publisher
- Trevor Boddy: Architecture curator, critic and consultant
- Alex Bozikovic: The Globe and Mail, architecture critic
- Ian Chodikoff: Architect and urban designer
- Maria Cook*: Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, manager, communications and advocacy
- Stephen Fai*: Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism, professor
- Sarah Gelbard*: Spacing Ottawa, editor
- Sophie Gironnay: Maison de l’architecture du Québec, co-founder and director
- Elsa Lam: Canadian Architect, editor-in-chief
- Shawn Micallef: Spacing Magazine, senior editor
- Rhys Phillips: Building and Canadian Interiors, associate editor
- Marco Polo: Ryerson University Department of Architectural Science, associate professor
- Lisa Rochon: Architecture Critic, Author, Design Strategist
- David Theodore: McGill University School of Architecture, assistant professor, architecture writer

Presenting Partners: Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism + Spacing Magazine

Funding Support: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) – $17,050.00
Sponsors: Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC), Carleton Immersive Media Studio (CIMS), Carleton Faculty of Engineering & Design, Ontario Association of Architects (OAA)

Knowledge Mobilization

In order to ensure that the information and ideas generated at the symposium are able to be continually contributive to the general discourse surrounding architecture criticism in Canada, as well as reach past the audience of those in attendance at the
event, multiple pre- and post-event documents have been produced. This is in addition to the analysis of the panel discussions included in the thesis.

Knowledge products include:

1. Raw audio recording of the event.
2. Transcript of the event recording.
3. Two forty-minutes podcast episodes produced by Spacing Radio:
   
   Episode 006: POP CAN CRIT – Meet the Crit (Published: November 2016)

   Episode 007: POP CAN CRIT – Crisis in Criticism (Published: December 2016)

4. A website (spacing.ca/popcancrit) containing all event information, including images and video from the event, as well as links to media coverage of the symposium. *Note: A website containing information pertaining to all PCC events has since been created at popcancrit.ca.*

5. Articles written by this author in support of the symposium and published in *Spacing Magazine* (summer 2016) and the *RAIC Journal* in *Canadian Architect* (August 2016)

6. Article in *Canadian Architect* by Editor-in-Chief, Elsa Lam.


**POP // CAN // CRIT 2017-2019**
Following the success of the inaugural symposium, the name (reworked to abbreviate ‘popular topics, Canadian context, critical questions’), structure, branding, and focus of the event was adapted by Carleton University PhD Candidate Brynne Campbell for her PhD Project of Architecture. The 2017 event was held on October 27, 2017 at the Design Exchange in Toronto. *POP // CAN // CRIT 2017: Marketing And Promotion Of Architecture In Canada* was also funded by a second SSHRC grant, in addition to sponsorship. After the 2017 event, this author and Campbell co-organized *POP // CAN // CRIT 2018: The Business Of Architecture In Canada* on October 19, 2018 at the Djavad Mowafaghian World Art Centre (Simon Fraser University), in Vancouver, BC, which was live-streamed nationally, as well as issued continuing education credits through a partnership with the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. After this event, which was presented by the Royal Architectural Institute (RAIC), PCC was acquired by the RAIC. *POP // CAN // CRIT 2019: Education And Emergence Of Architects In Canada* was held on October 26, 2019 at the Design Exchange in Toronto, as a part of the 2019 RAIC Festival of Architecture. The 2019 event was awarded ‘Most Unique Architecture Conference – North America’ by *Build Magazine* (UK), as a part of the BUILD Home Builders Awards. A fifth event was schedule for June 2020; however, it was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information on the 2017-2019 events, please visit [popcancrit.ca](http://popcancrit.ca).

**II. Panel Descriptions and Summaries**

This section will summarize each of the six panels, through a review of the raw audio recordings, in order to document each of the discussions and their conclusions.
**Panel 1: Everyone’s a Critic: Democratization / popularization / authority / crisis**

**Moderator:** Maria Cook

**Speakers:** Alex Bozikovic, Ian Chodikoff, Sophie Gironnay, Rhys Phillips

The opening panel explores the assertion that with the opening up of avenues for publishing and promoting of individual opinions/critiques through digital media, the authority of the professional newspaper critic has been called into crisis. It asks the question: If everyone is a critic, on what grounds should specific opinions or ideas be valued? It also looks at the role of the public in today’s architecture criticism.

**Panel 2: Lines Between: Academic / popular criticism (dividing lines / audiences)**

**Moderator:** Sarah Gelbard

**Speakers:** Trevor Boddy, Shawn Micallef, Marco Polo, David Theodore

Panel 2 examines the lines and divisions placed between academic and mainstream criticism in architecture, within the context of Ronan McDonald’s claim in *The Death of the Critic* that the gap is increasingly growing between the two. It asks the questions: In what ways can this division be bridge? And, what are the consequential outcomes if not?

**Panel 3: New Media: The role of social media, e-publishing, + blogs**

**Moderator:** Matt Blackett

**Speakers:** Ian Chodikoff, Elsa Lam, Shawn Micallef, David Theodore
This panel responds to the contemporary context of digital media, and its impact / influence on popular criticism. Critics currently utilizing social and new media platforms explain the shortcomings and potentials these new forms of communication can allow the critic, as well as address the questions they raise for ‘architecture criticism in the age of twitter’ (Paul Goldberger).

Panel 4: Criticism Looking Backwards: Criticism as an ongoing process

Moderator: Steve Fai

Speakers: Trevor Boddy, Elsa Lam, Marco Polo, Lisa Rochon

Panel 4 explores the potential of an architecture criticism that rather than responding to contemporary projects (often written before the building is open to the public or ‘lived in’), returns to projects years, or even decades later – at a time when a more reflective and insightful judgement or understanding can be made. While this is commonplace within academic studies and texts, this is not currently generally a part of the public’s relationship to architecture or architecture criticism.

Panel 5: Case Study: Mirvish + Gehry Toronto – The critical response

Moderator: Maria Cook

Speakers: Trevor Boddy, Alex Bozikovic, Lisa Rochon

As a case study that involves many of the issues noted above, the Mirvish+Gehry Toronto project is explored in regards to the critical response it received. Unprecedented for a Canadian project not yet built, the immense and divided
professional and public reaction to it resulted in a greatly extended approval process, and extensively refined design. This panel asks the questions: For what reasons was the professional critic mostly marginalized? Were the critics’ responses justified? And in what ways was the public response responsible for the final design?

**Roundtable:** *The future of popular architecture criticism in Canada*

**Moderator:** Sarah Gelbard

**Speakers:** Ian Chodikoff, Sophie Girronay, Elsa Lam, Rhys Phillips, David Theodore

The final roundtable session focuses on the hopes and ideals for the future of popular architecture criticism in Canada, with attention paid to the relationship between the public and architecture. How we can move from where the profession currently stands to where it needs to be in order to remain vital, is also be addressed.

**Summaries**

i. **Panel 1: Everyone’s a Critic: Democratization / popularization / authority / crisis**

**Moderator:** Maria Cook

**Speakers:** Alex Bozikovic, Ian Chodikoff, Sophie Girronay, Rhys Phillips

The first panel of the symposium undertakes a broad, and introductory approach to the current conditions, and possible crisis, in popular architecture criticism today. This
includes discussion of the democratization of criticism through the medium of online publications, the popularization of architecture criticism through these means, and the resultant shift in authority of the professional popular critic, exploring the concept of architect and critic Michael Sorkin, who coined the phrase “Everybody’s a Critic”.¹

The panel is opened by moderator Maria Cook, former architectural journalist for the Ottawa Citizen, and current manager of communications and advocacy for the RAIC, who explains the need to examine who the architecture critics of today are, and to look at the media and venues of publication for architecture criticism. This is due to the fact that while it is not new to have words and images of architecture published, what has changed is the medium of publication. This includes online and web-based sources such as blogs, news forums, chat rooms, and social media, and the lack of editorship or peer-review inherent in these forms of publication. As a result, Cook relates this shift to the “reduction in the critical review of arts and architecture by full-time writers in newspapers,” and asks the questions, “So what is the role and function of a professional critic in a world when anyone can comment through the Internet? And what does that do to the way in which architecture is discussed, understood, valued and judged?”

Cook then details the nature of an established newspaper, as a form of publication that employs professional journalists, gives voice to those affected by the developments of a city, and constitutes its own methods of accountability. This is countered by the

¹ Michael Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities (New York: Verso, 2011), 263
Internet, which allows for the publication of “personal-opinion and public relation campaigns to influence public perception, critical debate and public policy.” Cook then follows this claim by asking whether or not the content of the Internet is therefore inherently more democratic, due to the ability for anyone to contribute to it. This leads to the question of, “Where does authority and accountability come from?”

As such, Cook as moderator clearly defines the difference between full-time critics, and those who produce content for online sources, as well as what is published in a paper versus what exists online. This then leads the question of whether or not this opening up of less accountable sources online is resulting in a crisis for architecture criticism. Cook the both closes her introduction and opens the panel discussion with the questions, “If anybody, anywhere can comment, where does that leave the professional critic and their audiences? And does it enrich the conversation or undermine it?”

The first speaker to present is Rhys Phillips, writer and associate editor for Building and Canadian Interiors magazines, as well as contributor to the Ottawa Citizen (despite having no academic training in architecture). Phillips begins by referring to Canada architecture criticism as an “oxymoron”, stating that it is the “most ignored cultural form” in Canada in regards to the amount of critical coverage it receives in comparison to film, food, and other forms of criticism. Phillips then goes on to recognize the improvements of the built environment over the past few decades, but does not believe this is the result of “critical discourse”, and also lament the often failed projects of
architecture that do not connect to place. He does, however, see social media as having the positive strength to engage with those outside the “often esoteric academic and the [...] trade bubbles” as well as to look beyond the media’s fixation with specific elements and areas of architecture. However, there is also the counter challenge with social media due to a lack of “informed, assessed opinions”. Phillips seeks the lack of critical yet accessible content on “what constitutes good built-form” as the greatest challenge today for such forms of criticism. Phillips states, “Establishing meaningful popular discourse requires commentators, who first have carefully thought through what are the principals of good, bad and everything in-between design, and second are able to make this transparent and legible to a broad public.”

Here Phillips refers to Christian Norberg-Schulz, HRH The Prince of Wales, Vincent Scully and Michael Ho as critics with various, yet principled and grounded approaches to architecture criticism. He also refers to Finland’s national architecture policy as a way to bridge between the profession and the public as a way to raise public appreciation and debate relating to architecture and increase popular participation in such decision-making processes. Phillips also notes t of “understanding architecture as one aspect of civil skills” that the policy argues for. This includes the inclusion of critical thinking and knowledge of architecture in the school system, and the proliferation of Finish publishers producing books on Finish architecture. For Phillips, this is summarized by the need for an active and informed public “armed with appropriate tools.” He concludes:
“Informed popular criticism promotes public awareness of the complexity of the built world and provides the tools to intervene positively.”

Following Phillips, Sophie Gironnay, co-founder and director, Maison de l’architecture du Québec (MAQ), and former freelance-journalist and professional architecture critic for La Presse and Le Devoir, first notes the questions raised in the panel brief in regards to the division between the authoritative newspaper critic and the individual opinion online as well as at large. Gironnay begins with a biographical sketch of her career, noting that from 1993-2004 she was the only architecture critic writing for newspapers in the province of Quebec, with a full-time, weekly, thousand-word column (despite having no formal education in architecture, only literature and art history). However, she notes that there is no longer a regular architecture column present in any newspaper in Quebec. Gironnay highlights in the importance of architecture critics to maintain the same professional standards and rigour as journalists, including ethical implications, cross-checking facts, and excel at writing, as well as the need to influence and convince the editors of a paper in terms of your importance, legitimacy and where to place such writing, whether under culture, business, of the home section, while still working to “seduce the reader” in order to build a readership. Because of this, Gironnay states that she never felt that she had authority but rather that she had to be “twice as good as any other critic. Twice as good as the music critic. Twice as good as the cinema critic.” However, Gironnay also points out the “danger” of the profession where architect would be nice to her, as long as she wrote articles in favour of their work. As
such, after ten years of writing criticism in Quebec, she felt it was no longer possible for her to be rigorous enough to continue. Yet she also notes that over the years her opinion became more accountable as her knowledge built, but still had to writing with constant precautions such as trusting ones instinct, and having a good eye.

Gironnay then moves on the concept of public opinion, also noting the Internet as a helpful tool in the dissemination of images and familiarization or popularization of architecture for a more general audience. However, ultimately for Gironnay, it is the user of a space or building who has the only fully accountable opinion within architecture criticism, as it the one who is most closely relates to the building, “the real one, not the images, not photos, but the real building”, and thus is able to have an informed opinion.

Third to present, Ian Chodikoff, architect and current director of marketing and programming for IIDEX Canada, as well as the former editor-in-chief of Canadian Architect and executive director of the RAIC, begins by shifting the notion of a crisis in criticism slightly, referring to the ‘struggle’ that is integral to all forms of criticism. He states that, “The label of architecture critic shouldn’t be confounded with the struggle that an architecture critic, or any critic, is suppose to convey. And that struggle is to step back and try and think about what it is that brings value or merit to architecture and what it is that brings enjoyment or appreciation to that.” Chodikoff states that this is true for all forms of arts criticism, and that it is this struggle that allows for merit,
whether artistic or cultural or other, is what can allow for one to decide if something is of enough value to be discussed or enjoyed, as well as to allow for one to be able to develop their own sense of ‘taste’, through critical thinking. He then expresses the idea that the critic can both critique and produce, as the critic can react through words, and then do or make something based off of that critique.

Chodikoff then explains his thoughts on the idea of the democratization of criticism, relating it to both the informed citizen, and where we find or how we give value to something. He explains that one should not on a profession critic’s opinion any more than one would give worth to the number of “likes on Facebook” something receives, as for Chodikoff, these should not be the source of validation – whether online or in a newspaper – but rather that these forms of critique and of giving value should allow for the individual to begin their own critical thought process, in order to “distinguish what is interesting and of value in your life [...] and your contribution to society”

Lastly, Chodikoff briefly mentions the importance of looking at the entire process of architecture, not simply the end result or a building, stating that “process makes perfect”, and that the process of design and construction in architecture should be better explored in order to give deeper understanding than simply discrediting the aesthetics of a project in a critique, as the critique or the informed individual needs to look at the process that resulted in such a building.
Last to present, *Globe and Mail* architecture critic Alex Bozikovic, speaks from the perspective as an active professional critic, and reminds the audience that while we are discussing architecture criticism specifically, it is important to remember that any alleged crisis in criticism is not specific to architecture and that there are fewer staff critics across the profession of journalism as a whole.

However, Bozikovic is also quick to acknowledge that he is also not “entirely convinced that it is a crisis [in architecture criticism] or that that premise is entirely accurate.” This is due to the fact that while the channels of criticism are changing, so too is its readership, and that the democratization of publishing criticism has also allowed for a democratization of its audience, through online platforms. Bozikovic explains that there are also still those who are “professionally committed” to criticism across various digital platforms, and those who exist in between the two “poles” of the profession – those being the establishment critic and the “amateur with a blog”. This is in opposition to the commonly held assumption that all online critique must be without insight or depth, and Bozikovic goes as far as to even say that this shift to digital media, and its related effects on popular criticism, has also resulted in “considerable gains” for the profession, and its influence.

He acknowledges that blogs in particular, being the main platform for the online dissemination of architecturally-related content, are both a challenge and an asset, and that they “cut both ways”. This is due to an issue in terms of the use of images, often
“commissioned by architects for their own interests and a lack of critical writing that goes with that,” and the fact that, “more and more we are consuming architecture as a set of images that have been edited and composed to sell us.” Bozikovic sees another side to this, however, as it could also be said that the public is engaging with architecture more so than ever before through these channels. He sites the shift that took place almost twenty years ago when Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao project resulted in a significant increase in the popular awareness” or popularization of contemporary architecture, and that it is easy for us to forget how much as changed since then.

While not always a critical presentation of architecture, sites such as ArchDaily still succeed in presenting, both visually and through text, a mass amount of international architecture to both those inside and outside of the profession. Sites and platforms such as this effect how we all see architecture, which should be seen as a public benefit, even when not critically based, as they increase the non-specialized awareness of architecture. Bozikovic also points out that we might be glorifying the “golden age of newspaper criticism” and the times of critics such as Ada Louise Huxtable, as it is important to remember that “when people talk, we are all winning, and its important not to overlook the gains that we, as architecture fanatics, have made by broader public engagement, shallow though it may be at times, snarky though it may be with the things that we care about.” This therefore brings Bozikovic to the place of proponent for the democratization of criticism, a-critical though it may be.
After this initial opening of the panel, moderator Cook opens up the discussion portion of the panel by stating Sorkin’s principle that architecture criticism is a “service profession”, and asks the panelists how they view their role as architecture critics.

For Chodikoff, the critic attempts to be an individual voice, an advocate, to make the right decisions in terms of how and when you present a project, but also notes that it is a political role in terms of the relationship between the critic and the architect, depending on the tone of critique.

Thus, while there is what Chodikoff refers to as an “inextricable tug towards being a service professional”, the critic must also “cultivate a trust and workability with your collaborators.” This is due to the fact that without the ability to work with architects, it is difficult to be an effective critic, according to Chodikoff. He also notes, however, that today there are also other opportunities for critics to work, outside of traditional journalism, and to engage in critical or curatorial practices such as firm-based monographs.

Phillips then begins to answer the question of the role of the critic by stating that he does not believe that there is a crisis in criticism, due to the fact that there “has never really been effective architectural criticism” in Canada, compared Europe, and more specifically Finland. Phillips then points out the functional considerations of
architecture, and that he believes these outweigh its more artistic qualities (and thus equates architecture to more of a service profession, or a “functional-art”).

Gironnay then responds by stating that while she believes that her “job” is to “fight against ugliness”, or the work of judgement, she sees this as small part of her position. She explains how at the start of her career she worked to make architects familiar to her readers, to humanize them, and to show their faces and voices in interviews, as opposed to only images and content related to the buildings themselves. However, as technology has advanced, and with the now proliferate dissemination of images, Gironnay believes the critic’s role has become to provide information and context, and to “move on to phenomenons, politics, why are there so little competitions in architecture [and where there is not] transparency in the process, in the choice of architects.” Ultimately for Gironnay, it is this in depth work, and the need to “go in deeper to aspects of society,” that is at the forefront of the critic’s role.

Next Bozikovic paraphrases *New York Magazine* architecture critic Justin Davidson, stating that, “Architecture criticism is technology, it is urban design, it is sociology, it is economics, it is politics.” But Bozikovic points out that while salaried or professional critics are now most likely to think and write about architecture in a holistic way, this is a new trend after years of architecture being understood and looked at as “object buildings”, and most often resulting in formalist critique. Yet this change in the focus of critical architectural discourse is being brought about by the fact that, according to...
Bozikovic, this era of the iconic, formal building is ending, and that cities are now much more interested in bigger issues that effect them much more significantly, such as affordability and sustainability, and that “it’s important that new buildings work in more than one sense.” This idea or a broader context, or issues-based criticism is important for Bozikovic, as well as the notion that it is “important that readers / citizen critics get to look at the new building in their neighbourhood and understand why it works or doesn’t work in a straightforward way.” Bozikovic then concludes by stating it is the critic’s role to explain “what makes for a good building or urban design, and to establish that terminology,” for their readers.

Chodikoff then responds to this by stating that it is very important for one to understand the language, vocabulary, and grammar of a visual medium such as architecture, and that as different buildings serve different purposes, the issues that matter and need to be addressed are specific to type and context of the architecture. As such, the critic needs to therefore be clear about the lens or tool kit that they are using to fame their critique, and to be clear about the “language that they use” in order for the readers to know what the critic is look at as well as how they are looking at it. Ultimately for Chodikoff, it is the previously discussed idea of the struggle that needs to be addressed and communicated clearly, either by the architect or the critic that is most important.
As an aside, the discussion of whether architecture is or is not an art also was frequently addressed in the above speakers’ responses. To this, Rhys clarifies that architecture is an art, but that it needs to be critically considered as more than just art, in order for its complexity to be understood.

Gironnay then cautions against architecture criticism becoming as hermetic as art criticism in its use of language in order for it to remain democratic, and that the way it is written is important, so that the critic does not forget about their reader or their accessibility to the text and information. This then leads Gironnay to topic of the “layman opinion”, stating that it is not only through blogs and other online platforms that average citizens can become in the discussions around architecture, citing the concept of “co-design” where community consultation is apart of the design process. However, she herself is not a “believer” in this process, rather subscribing to the idea of the architectural “genius” of the architect. None-the-less, she notes that there are tools and ways to involve the public, including protest and NIMBYism (the not-in-my-backyard phenomenon), and that it is the popular critic who can give the public these tools.

Moderator Cook then asks a final question for the panel, quoting critic Paul Goldberger as saying, “The point of this realm of journalism is to be tough and judgemental, and to expose the wretchedness or 99% of what gets built.” She then asks the panelists to react to the quote and whether or not they feel they are allowed to be “viciously critical”.

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For Bozikovic, Goldberger’s quote is quintessential to a “New York-approach”, stating that it is not very “Canadian” to be critical, implying that it is symptom of our national perspective and discourse. He agrees, however, that much of what is being built today is “bad”, even despite possible architect-involvement. As such, he seems himself as an advocate for architecture, helping to engage and instruct or educate his readers, in order to show them “what the issues are, and how to look at the built world around them.” What he does see as areas more open to critical critique are “institutional or circumstantial” processes, such as provincial procurement methods, where there is little chance of a positive or insightful designs resulting from them. Yet Bozikovic also points out the need to write about what is going well within architecture in order to advocate for the “people and ideas that are important”, despite the fact that he sees many great concerns in contemporary architectural practice in Canada. Thus, there is a need to look at the issues at large, as opposed to focusing in on one failed design, in order to try and create the greatest change.

To this Gironnay agrees, stating that one of the “struggles is to make people have confidence in architects”. Chodikoff then shares that he has never written a negative review, due to the fact that he believes that his role as a “critic or commentator” is to be an “enabler of a conversation or dialogue,” and that negativity will not allow for one to gain an audience or readership.
Here Bozikovic interjects though, stating that people do in fact like a “take-down”, to which Chodikoff agrees. Chodikoff concludes that as a critic you need to be mindful “to encourage a conversation, for to encourage change you need to encourage a conversation, and you therefore encourage opportunities for change and that usually is constructive, and positive, and enabling, and encouraging.”

Phillips does not see a concern with critical criticism, noting that it is in newspapers, as opposed to trade publications, that allow for such criticism. He also notes the difference between being critical and being vicious. Instead he sees the critic’s role as the ability to point out why a building is a “good piece or architecture” or “why it works”, all the while “being transparent of the values and principles that you are applying to come to that conclusion,” and that the same is true for a “bad building”. Ultimately for Phillips, it is for people to gain understanding, and to be able to understand the critic’s view when looking at the building or space themselves, leading them to then demand more of their cities.

At this point, the floor is opened to questions from the audience.

The first question is in regards to whether critics are better able to explain what constitutes “good architecture” to a lay readership.
Gironnay first responds to this question by stating that judgement is not the most important quality in a critic, but rather it is the ability to describe. She also shares that in her own professional experience, the critic does not write for the architects, and that the critic’s position is not to tell the architecture what to do, but rather it is the public whom the criticism is intended for. As such, the focus is on society, and the need to “denounce bad processes, bad choices.”

Bozikovic then answers by stating that it is implicit, and that over time, the readers should be able to learn from the critic’s writing, if well written. Bozikovic also notes, however, that there are opportunities for a critic to be “proactive and suggest solutions to a problem.” Here he cites New York Times critic Michael Kimmelman’s role in commissioning and then publishing a proposal for an architectural solution to Penn Station, equating it to an act of advocacy. Bozikovic shares that he has “mixed feelings” about this, but also sees the potential of such form of critical practice in some circumstances.

Gironnay sees danger in this however, and the thinking that a critic could know better than professional architects. She also notes that the idea that critic can “change the world” comes and goes with time for the critic, but that it is just an “illusion”.

Phillips then shares the importance of giving tools to others for them to be able to distinguish good architecture for themselves. He also indicates that it is not architects
but the lay public who wants to know what the critic thinks, especially since architects themselves often avoid critique.

The final question pertains to the building each panelist finds most inspiring.


Chodikoff: The neighbourhoods that represent change, such as Gatineau, QC, and Vanier (Ottawa), ON.

Gironnay: Many new public buildings in Quebec, and the new generation of young-architect-design house additions and home design.

Bozikovic: The importance of housing, especially well-done small and mid-scale infill housing, and the office building QRC West in Toronto designed by Sweeny and Co. Architects.

Therefore, in summary of panel one, there is general agreement of the fact that the democratization of architecture criticism, through the introduction of digital publication platforms such as blogs and social media sites, has resulted in a shift of the authority and reduction of the professional newspaper or popular critic. Yet this is not seen as a
crisis point, but rather a positive progression as it has also led to a popularization and increased public interest in and awareness of architecture in general. This duality, of a more accessible yet less critical criticism, however, leads to questions about the contemporary role of the popular architecture critic, and the effect a more democratized critical landscape has on how architecture is understood, valued, designed, and judged. For while online critique is inherently more democratic and available, it is not clear if it is more or less effective, due to a lack of accountability and grounding.

Thus while the internet can be seen as a positive medium from which to increase public awareness and understanding of architecture—a key role of popular criticism—it often lacks the rigour, authority, and criticality found in professional criticism. Whether this is cause for concern, however, is less clear. On the one hand, despite the reduction in full-time newspaper critics across the continent, there are more people writing and reading about criticism through its online dissemination. On the other hand, there is the sense that the public needs an informed critic to first help educate them on how to look at architecture, and the systems that surround it, as well as to cut away at the a-critical images and writings disseminated online by firms as PR campaigns. Overall, however, there is a general agreement that any form of conversation about architecture and the built environment, at any level of rigour, criticality, or academic understanding, is better than no conversation, and thus while the democratization of criticism may threaten to
dilute the professional critic’s voice, the added voices only help amplify the message and understanding of how architecture affects all.

Therefore, in relation to the role of the professional critic, both in light of, and independent from the democratization of criticism, it is agreed that it is meant to be considered a service profession, with the professional popular critic ultimately meant to be an educator of the public, helping familiarize them with the role of the architect, address the broader context and issues that relate to architecture, explain the terminology needed to be able to engage in informed discussions about architecture, give the tools to express counter opinions to proposed projects, enable conversations, act as a advocate for the discipline and the profession, and weigh both the artistic and functional considerations of architecture. This then leads to the question central to the thesis, being what influence does the popular critic have on architectural decision-making? But in review of the above, it can be surmised that the answer would be that the popular critic fulfills a public, as opposed to professional role, and thus their work is intended to affect people, rather than projects.

ii. Panel 2: Lines Between: Academic / popular criticism (dividing lines / audiences)

**Moderator:** Sarah Gelbard

**Speakers:** Trevor Boddy, Shawn Micallfe, Marco Polo, David Theodore
The second panel looks at the topic of the division between academic and popular or mainstream architecture criticism. The panel is opened by Sarah Gelbard, Ottawa editor for Spacing magazine and current PhD candidate in urban planning at McGill University, who introduces the topic as well as questions whether there really is a divide between these two forms of critical practice, or if it possible that the division lies within academic criticism itself. She explains, referring to both the panelists as well as herself, that many of those practicing criticism “wear multiple hats, we all speak in different voices at different times, and we use those skills that we learn either through backgrounds in architecture, through teaching architecture, through journalism, through a variety of backgrounds that we bring that into a practice that is popular and a practice that is academic.” Gelbard then counters the panel description premise of an increasingly greater gap between academic and popular criticism, asking if there might actually be greater amount of overlap between the two presently. This is due to the fact that while academics may be seen to be esoteric in their language and mediums of publication, those the present climate is resulting in a greater demand for critical writing across the spectrum of means and readers, due to an increasingly sophisticated readership. This variety, according to Gelbard, can result in one individual teaching students academically, writing popularly for a general publication, and then tweeting a commentary. Gelbard then concludes by asking what can be considered to be “unpopular” criticism.
The first panelist to present is David Theodore, assistant professor at McGill University’s School of Architecture and *Canadian Architect* contributor. Theodore opens by presenting eight points on the topic of academic/popular criticism.

Point 1. Architecture critics are university trained, who, while may have professional training, are almost always university graduates. This results in critics being part of a select portion of Canadian society who have a post-secondary education, which Theodore estimates to be one out of four or five Canadians.

Point 2. Architecture criticism is not important at universities. “As far as universities are concerned, it is not even on the priority list. It has always been a fringe affair. It is not a university matter.”

Point 3. Architecture criticism is about writing, not buildings. Architecture schools are about buildings not writing.

Point 4. “At its best, architecture criticism is neither popular nor academic, but belongs to another tradition *bellette.*” To this her refers to *The Sunday Times, Harper’s* magazine, *Saturday Night, The New Yorker*, which are read for their writing as opposed to what they say about architecture. They are about good writing, not about good buildings.
Point 5. As a result, Theodore sees architecture criticism as a “middle brow” practice, as it does not “deal with the sophistication and sophistries of history and theory,” and has little relation to mass culture (i.e. the architecture of Tim Horton’s or Walmart). Thus, it is not interested in either high or low culture, but rather “middle brow” interests.

Point 6. The concern for criticism has switched from architecture to urbanism, for both popular and academic critics, as this built environment is looked at more holistically than as individual buildings.

Point 7. According to Theodore, our understanding of urbanism is also very “middle brow” or middle-class, in terms of what good urbanism is.

Point 8. “Architectural criticism is about taste and the academy has better mechanisms for determining what good taste it [...] Academic is better at making those distinction [as to what is or is not a good building] than middle-brow criticism is.”

The second panelist to speak is Spacing senior editor, Toronto Star columnist, and University of Toronto instructor Shawn Micallef, who begins by stating that he does not consider himself to be an architecture critic. This is due to the fact that he does not have a formal academic background in architecture, but rather writing about architecture, which is only about twenty percent of his work, grew out of his interest in urbanism. This has led to his writing in both Spacing and the Toronto Star, the latter of which he
considers to still have great reach to all ends of the social and cultural spectrum, despite the overall decline in print publications. As such, he strives to reach across the broad audience of the paper through his use of general, yet entertaining language and content, in order to spark interest in his readers about their city and help them better see and understand their everyday urban landscapes.

Micallef then explains his areas of interest, many of which are on the cultural outskirts and often ignored in criticism, including parking huts (which he humourously suggests deserve heritage plaques), pastiche suburban housing, juxtapositions of iconic buildings, reservoirs, mid-century modernism (especially projects from Canada’s centennial in 1967), brutalist architecture, late post-modernism, Robart’s Library in Toronto, and public art outside of the gallery and related to the context of the city.

Next to speak, Marco Polo, architect, curator, author, associate professor in Ryerson University’s Department of Architectural Science, and former editor of *Canadian Architect*, responds to Gelbard’s opening remark about the “fluidity” between the poles of popular and academic criticism, which Polo believes to be true of his own work. As such, he has written across various platforms, but also sees significant differences between the two, including their responsibilities and audiences. For Polo, the responsibility of the traditional research university is the creation, rather than the dissemination, of knowledge, placed even above the mandate to teach. However, and despite this general statement, Polo also sees a difference within schools of
architecture, where a large majority of the faculty also have a professional background in architectural practice, and thus are able to move between these poles more fluidly, within the range of hermetic to accessible discourse, but remaining mostly accessible critically speaking.

Polo also address the topic of the first panel and notes the reduction in professional popular criticism as a real phenomenon in Canada, but that at the same time, the demand for academic criticism has increased as a sort of “pendulum swing” and as a result of funding policies and research mandates, resulting in an increased number of architectural academic publications, which Polo still considers to be quite accessible. These have been mainly in book format, as well as journal publications, and have allowed for greater long form writing opportunities, as opposed to 500 word newspapers articles. Here Polo refers back to Phillip’s discussion in the previous panel about the lack of architectural education and exposure to school-aged children in Canada, and the resultant need for critics to then educate their readers, and assume no foundational knowledge of their readership. This is in opposition to the word-count for academics, and their ability to write for an already informed reader. This leads Polo to stating that the popular critic’s role is therefore to help educate the general reader, who can then go on to read more specific and informed material.

Last to present, architecture curator, critic, educator, and consultant Trevor Boddy, begins by sharing his approach to critical practice, and his article “The Conundrums of
Architectural Criticism”, published in *The Journal of Architectural Education*. In it he shares his belief that while architecture criticism is appreciated as a general idea, and by the public, but few actually appreciate it in practice, including architects, developers, editors, advertisers, etc. He also then explains the forms of criticism he speaks to in the article including activist criticism, “which is towards an end to change things, make a better world,” and includes critics such as William Morris, Ada Louise Huxtable and Jane Jacobs, moralist criticism, which includes critics such as John Ruskin’s higher spiritual approach to criticism, and the German tradition of formalist or theoretical criticism, which “at best, this form of writing is exceptionally rigorous and unbroken to the distractions of time and place of its creation, but at its worst can be pretentious, philosophizing, or pointless formal analysis.”

Boddy then speaks to a time in his career when he did not believe that criticism could affect architecture, as a theoretical skeptic, as well as his belief, in opposition to Theodore’s comments, that architecture criticism does not only take place on the page in written format, but can also happen in venues such as the art gallery and some forms of practice, in addition to the importance of the relationship between history and criticism. He then also notes his involvement with the International Committee of Architectural Critics (CICA), and the awarding of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Royal Gold Medal in 2014 to architect-scholar-critic Joseph Rykwert, who acts as President of CICA. This led to the Joseph Rykwert Symposium on architecture criticism in February 2014. Boddy concludes by noting his writing for dailies and lifestyle magazines,
as well as lecturing, exhibition work, and design installations as other forms of critical practice.

Gelbard then begins the open discussion portion of the panel, stating that she will ask two questions and have two of the four panellists answer each. Her first question is directed to Micallef and Polo and regards the intersection between the creation of knowledge and the entertainment of the audience within critical writing, whether academic or popular.

Polo begins by recognizing the common hybrid definitions of entertainment, such as info-tainment, and the need to present material in an engaging way for an audience, despite personally resisting the notion of entertainment within criticism. He does, however, refer back to Boddy’s mention of curated gallery exhibitions, which attempt to be accessible and experiential enough to be relatable to the general viewer, but which are often accompanied by more academic catalogues or texts that for the related knowledge to be expanded upon. Polo sees this as a valuable opportunity for architectural knowledge to be made more relatable to the general public, in a popular way, while still allowing for depth in terms of the research related to the visual components of an exhibition.

Next Micallef continues to look at areas of overlap between popular and academic criticism, believing that while the writer may write for a varied audience, it is the reader
who decides what they are interested in reading, as “there are expectations that the audience brings”. Micallef also refers to Polo’s mention of the lack of design education (and appreciation) for architecture in Canada. As such, Micallef works to help increase his readers’ appreciation for our build environments and “what we have”, only occasionally working in a more negatively critical manner.

Gelbard then addresses her second question to Theodore and Boddy, noting the unique opportunity such a symposium brings, with “critics critiquing [the] criticism of architecture, and the meta-level this symposium is representing”. She then questions the double role of criticism to be “the harsh criticism, the truth you need to hear, and the celebration, advocacy role” within both academic and popular forms. Next she suggests that the academic critic can critique popular criticism as being naïve and uneducated, while the popular critic or everyday user of architecture can claim that the popular critic is detached or pretentious, despite “the expertise that comes and enables that criticism”. Gelbard then asks the panelists to respond to these meandering thoughts.

Boddy first responds by stating that a definition of criticism is useful, “whether it is inclusive enough or not”. Boddy then gives his definition as: “Architectural criticism is the interpretation of the intellectual, tectonic, technical, and social notions implicit in the design of buildings and cities.” Next, however, Boddy turns his attention to the pedagogical practice of critiques, or “crits”, with architecture schools, which he believes
are often more “verbal performance” than actual critique or judgement or adhere to his definition above. This results in “a phenomenon, which I [Boddy] think a lot of practicing architects, because of the bad experience with criticism as students, have a lifelong abhorrence of criticism.” This, according to Boddy, differs from other fields of art criticism where those being critiqued are not “psychologically affected” the way architects are “by their crit room experience.” And thus, the “notion of the crit” is also something Boddy believes needs more consideration within architectural education.

Next Theodore responds by returning to comments made by Micallef, such as the shift from considerations of buildings to considerations of the city, as well as Theodore’s own comments on “taste”. This includes questions as to what the critic is to do in cases where a building is good architecture but negatively affects the city, or when a building can be appreciated for its architectural merits but it’s users cannot appreciate it, as is the case for many brutalist buildings. Theodore states, “It can be good design, it can be bad design. The city is not made up of this kind of standard of taste.” This differs, according to Theodore, from Polo’s comments regarding the work of historians and theorists within an academic context, where one can “work-out what those standards of taste might be.” Theodore goes on to speak to the difficulty and subtleness of this work, which he sees as “very uninteresting to most people”, while referring to the work of the likes of Micallef as being, and I quote at length here, “where we’re at, [what] we’re interested in… we’re interested in making the city livable, but also kind of exciting, and again the ‘we’ there are these middle-brow people who have been to universities. We
still haven’t figured out how to connect with the other 80% of the population who haven’t been to universities – what kind of cities they want and they need – and again, architecture criticism is completely unqualified to make any judgements on that new city.”

The panel is then opened up to the audience for questions, the first of which is in regards Polo’s previous comments and the important role that academics can and should play in speaking to the public, and the ways academics are or could be connecting more with the general public.

Polo first responds to where this should be taking place, to which he concludes that the most direct way of doing so is through exhibitions, seeing them as much more generally accessible than publications. This includes exhibitions in both galleries and more public venues such as the National Art Centre, which hosted an exhibition co-curated by Polo, in promotion of his book on centennial architecture in Canada. Polo also points out that he believes that academic critics can and should publish within popular media.

Next Micallef details a course he taught for the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) called ‘Cities for People’ which saw his students suggest design interventions to pull out the hidden characteristics of banal neighbourhoods, as well as write about the project as blog entries on the Spacing website. This included Micallef’s coaching of their writing and language, helping them to avoid jargon, and instructing them to write as if
they were writing for the mother or grandmother who had little to know knowledge of architecture. This ability of “communicating the work to a general audience” was the skill they were to develop, in order to one day be able to present their own work to consultation boards and the like in a way that would be understandable, and avoid alienation. Ultimately it was to “plant the seed about communicating to two different audiences about the same thing.”

In follow up, Boddy then refers to all three points of the previous speakers, and describes the mandate of his ‘Writing for Architects’ course at the University of British Columbia (UBC), which is meant to help architects communicate their work both through writing and verbal presentations, as “you get a lot of beautifully illustrated bad ideas these days” through the proliferation of digital design renderings, and to rather place the emphasis on the “importance and place of language and criticism, and using plain but powerful and accurate language has never been more important in architectural culture, and will remain as such,” according to Boddy.

Lastly, Theodore mentions the MAQ’s Young Critic’s competition (founded by symposium panelist Gironnay, and which he, along with fellow panelist Elsa Lam are jury members), which is meant to “celebrate how you enjoy buildings through writing […] good writing”. To this Theodore remarks on the importance of enjoying good criticism for its writing, not simply because it is trying to “make the world a better place.” He concludes, “Read good writing because you like good writing.”
Boddy then returns to comments made previously by Polo, in regards to the change in attitude towards criticism within the academy. In this he refers to his colleague Michael Sorkin, and the challenge Sorkin had in writing criticism while also teaching. This was due to the nature of his criticism often being critical of a project or practice, which would then inadvertently reflect on the academic institution he was associated with. Boddy states, “Academia did not know what to do with a practicing critic whose main career is criticism.” And while Boddy thinks there has been some change in the academic climate toward critical practice, he believes that it is still very difficult for critics to find employment within the university.

To this Theodore responds by interjecting that, “Architectural criticism is not an academic research activity, so why would he [Sorkin] get a research position for doing research?”

Boddy then counters, “It’s an intellectual practice.”

Theodore continues by also referring to Polo’s previous comment that research is one of the university’s pillars, and thus if one is not engaged in research, there is not a place for such a professional.
Boddy interjects, “Critical inquiry is one of the most noble and ancient forms of academic investigation.”

Theodore counters: “It is noble and ancient, it’s just not part of the university…”

Here Boddy refers to Plato and Socrates, stating, “Critical thinking is level one of research and inquiry.”

Theodore attempts to resolve this debate by stating that there is a difference between the academic job market and critical thought as an academic form of inquiry.

At this, Gelbard, as moderator, brings the discussion back to the main panel topic of whether or not there is a clear division between academic and popular criticism, versus the idea the criticism can be the place of overlap between “formal training as an architect, becoming an academic, and recognizing the various forms of criticism that I [Gelbard] participated in, doesn’t really fit in either of those. It doesn’t make me a professional architect and it doesn’t make me a professional academic, but it has been skills that have developed me as both. And that through writing, through critical forms of practice, through walking tours, through finding various means of working out my own ideas and working how I can make those part of the larger discussion.”
Polo then notes that within academia, when one talks about criticism, it is usually discussed within the context or “umbrella” of architecture history/theory, which are considered to be much more research-based, traditionally, as an academic activity. Polo then notes that criticism is not usually recognized on its own, academically, but rather only if related to history and/or theory.

Another question is then asked regarding whether the divide between academic and popular criticism could be considered as the philosophical (or strategic) versus the applied (or tactical) forms of its practice?

Boddy first responds by detailing an international exhibit he did on the city of Vancouver, which he sees as being both strategic and tactical, as well as a wood-installation he completed in Trafalgar Square.

Next Micallef refers to his psychogeographical wanderings as a form of critical practice stating, “That sort of practice of going through the world, of gathering information and images, and regurgitating them in some way is very messy.”

A final question is then asked, referring to the controversial Victims of Communism Memorial that was planned for Ottawa, and which received great critical backlash.
Again Boddy is the first to respond, stating that when the initial proposal was rejected, after much lobbying, including from the RAIC, it opened up a new venue for critical commentary, and one that could lead to results. He states, “You had a damn good fight in Ottawa about design [...] and I hope more of that happens around the country.”

Micallef then relates this critical response to that of the proposed addition to the Chateau Laurier, which Bozikovic had discussed on the previous panel.

At this point Gelbard brings the panel to a close.

Therefore, in summary of panel two, there is evidenced a fluidity and blurring of the line between popular and academic criticism in architecture. This is due to the fact that authors of criticism often work in both areas, shifting between the academy and more popular mediums and forms of critical practice, including popular media and public exhibitions. There is also an understanding that while popular criticism may in some occasions be read by laypeople without post-secondary education, it is generally written by and for those with a university degree. Both forms have also become increasingly more accessible, and the reduction in professional popular critics has been countered in some respects by an increase in demand for academic critique, including the writing of books than can be accessed by the general public as well.
The greatest irony, however, is that while popular criticism is usually afforded no more than 500-800 words, for an audience with little base architectural knowledge, the long-formed writing and word counts given to academic criticism are for an audience already informed and steeped in architectural knowledge. This leads to a remark for the need for a definition of what criticism is, and whether critical practice can include not only writing, but other forms that intersect between the public and the profession/academia, such as curatorial practices and occasions. There is also a sense that the role academic critics play can and should shift towards assisting in the education of the public. Here the importance of using accessible language for the public is stressed, as well as the need for architects to better learn how to use language to present their own ideas. This also leads to a questioning of why architects are so opposed to critique, compared to other art forms such as film and art, with it being suggested that the psychological impact of student “crits” as a form of studio appraisal is damaging. There is then also the question of the idea of taste, with is being suggested that how the standard of taste is determined differs for popular and academic criticism, with the academy being able to work out what the standard should be – something that popular criticism is not qualified to do according to one panelist.

Lastly, a disagreement about whether [popular] criticism belongs in the academy at all is put forth and debated. It is claimed that criticism is not a research-based academic or intellectual pursuit and thus should not be a university endeavour. This is countered with the claim that criticism is one of the oldest forms of academic inquiry, that being
critical questioning, and the first level of research and academic investigation. It is then suggested that popular criticism is only really academic in nature when attached to history/theory.

iii. Panel 3: New Media: The role of social media, e-publishing, + blogs

Moderator: Matt Blackett

Speakers: Ian Chodikoff, Elsa Lam, Shawn Micallef, David Theodore

This panel responds to the contemporary context of digital media, and its impact/influence on popular criticism. Critics currently utilizing social and new media platforms explain the shortcomings and potentials these new forms of communication can allow the critic, as well as address the questions they raise for ‘architecture criticism in the age of twitter’ (Paul Goldberger).

Moderated Matthew Blackett, publisher and editor-in-chief for Spacing magazine, opens the third panel. This panel looks at the role of new and digital media, blogs, and social media pertaining to popular architecture criticism. Blackett then begins by introducing his professional background, which is in journalism as opposed to architecture. However, his strong interest in urbanism and city building/planning led to his involvement in the creation of Spacing magazine as an outlet for these topics within the context of Toronto, where it was not felt that other media outlets were dealing with such topics in a critical manner (Spacing was founded in 2003). Blackett then details how Spacing was an early adopter of the shift towards digital media, launching the
blog site at the same time as the print magazine (the blog site runs parallel to the magazine, with both shared and original content, including a network of city-specific blog sites such as Spacing Ottawa. The site also allows for more timely publishing of articles such as news items and opinion pieces). From here the magazine adopted various social media platforms as they were created, and Blackett interestingly notes that the sharing of comments and reactions to stories, which usually took place on the blog site itself, under the specific article, has largely moved to these social platforms. Blackett reflects, “It has been a very empowering thing to be able to use the digital media and to become a critic in many ways without many of us being formally trained in the world of planning or architecture.”

Micallef, a founding editor and part-owner of Spacing, is the first to panelist speak, and reiterates Blackett’s comment about the ability for the blogs to react to real-time events, compared to the magazine which takes three to four months to go through production to publishing. For Micallef, the downside to the digital version of Spacing is that there is no revenue model. This does not allow for the magazine to pay for stories in the same way that it does for stories in the print version, outside times where Spacing has received grants specifically for digitally-published content. This, according to Micallef, leads to hesitancy to ask writers to contribute to the digital site, as they cannot be compensated properly. Micallef states, “It’s hard to ask people to do things for no money, because we have been asked too many times to do things for no money.”
From here Micallef, begins to discuss his use of the social media platform Twitter, which he began using to record musings about his psychogeographical walks through the city. He would then received feedback and comments as interactions from those who would follow his account, suggesting things he should do or see in the various parts of town he would be walking through, as a sort of “real-time fact-check” about his observations. Micallef refers to twitter as his “public notebook” where he is “spitting things out into the world” and where they “interact with other people in these wonderful ways”. These tweets then went on to help inform his first book, *Stroll: Psychogeographic Walking Tours of Toronto* (Coach House Books, 2010), and he sees them as a sort of research-method. However, Micallef notes that these more critical observations and explorations are interspersed with unrelated jokes and pop culture references. In this, he hopes his “feed” is entertaining, so that “that level of engagement, like chatty engagement, about place and buildings again hopefully brings people into that thing without kind of lecturing.” Micallef admits, however, that occasionally he will use the site to lecture or rant about politics. He concludes, “So it has this kind of range from stupid to maybe semi-smart and back. But that engagement with people back-and-forth is really valuable. Micallef then goes through eight slides of tweets he has tweeted in the last year or so that were meant to help put unseen places on people’s “radar”.

*Canadian Architect* Editor-in-Chief, Elsa Lam, jokingly points out that one of the benefits of online publishing is that you can correct it, and “then it’s like it never happened... in print it’s there forever.”
Lam then goes on to introduce herself as well as her publication, noting that the symposium contains a ‘lineage’ of editors, having stepped into the position four years ago at the time of the symposium, and following terms by both fellow panelists Chodikoff and Polo. She explains that *Canadian Architect* was established in 1955 by architect Jim Murray, and in contrast to *Spacing*, who were early adopters of digital publishing; *Canadian Architect* was a late adopter, having a twitter account that shows its foundation date as April 2013. Lam still sees the magazine’s use of social media as experimental, both in terms of its relationship to the printed magazine, as well as the potential opportunities that it could result in, despite having no revenue model for it which affects their ability to pay for specific content. It is currently being used to increase the distribution of content from the print issues. Lam also notes that while the magazine is sent to all architects in Canada, that is only a small percentage of the public, with digital media allowing them share their content more broadly. Thus Lam sees digital and social media as a potential bridge or channel for criticism to reach not only the profession but also the public more generally, in the form of popular criticism, and with little additional work as the content is already created. It also allows them to broaden their network with other publications as they can re-post or share content from them. In relations to popular Canadian architecture criticism, specifically, “this aspect of digital bears noting,” according to Lam, as the culture of criticism is not established as in places such as New York City, which has “robust discussions”, as the country’s geographical size does not allow for one critic to see everything, and thus smaller
projects are often only covered by local media. Here digital plays an important role in these smaller publications being able to be linked back to Canadian Architect. Lam sees Facebook as a place for candid conversations with both experts and laypersons alike, and at “both high levels and low levels” in more organic ways than a traditional interview, citing the feeling of having someone such as Phyllis Lambert ‘like’ one of your posts. Lam concludes by saying that she also uses social media to test the interest in topics and to see, “who’s reacting to it and how are they reacting?”

Next, architect and urban designer, and director of programming and marketing at IIDEX Toronto, Ian Chodikoff, looks at the use of social media as a tool for critics. He begins by reflecting on his time as the editor of Canadian Architect, where he would write the monthly editorial specifically for a four or five individuals whom he hoped would read it and trigger change, despite publishing 12,000 copies of the magazine, noting the social media is similar but “more precise”. He notes the fatigue of repetitive e-blasts or electronic mailings, and that targeting a precise audience is extremely important if you want them to listen to a certain message, invoke change and be effective. Here Chodikoff notes the importance of understanding the metrics of the data from social media and using it as a “tool to sharpen your point of view in a very precise way,” in order to make a very pointed critique. He relates this to the idea that getting the attention of and convincing one individual, such as Lambert, in a concise and pointed way, would be more effective than a large street protest, and allow for a strong critique. He also notes that is the mission, not just the technical delivery or message itself, that it
is important in the effectiveness of the content shared. Chodikoff concludes by sharing that he believes that there is a very “powerful and positive future” for digital criticism.

Professor David Theodore then opens by stating that he comes in more “orthogonal” to the discussion, and that he is starting from the ideas that social media platforms are “benign tools that we can use to promote ourselves,” and a “misunderstanding of what these giant corporations are doing in the middle of the world.” He notes that one of the positives of new media is the ease of sharing “sight and sound” or images and audio (suggesting someone will develop a hybrid between podcasts and Instagram at some point and which will be “very powerful” and suggesting video is too time consuming and intrusive), with another being an increased interest in architecture and cities.

Lam then comments on Theodore’s suggestions, noting *Spacing* as an example of the increased interest in architecture and architecture criticism, and more specifically, a shift to urban criticism. She notes that in regards to popular criticism, it is blogs such as *Urban Toronto*, and other real estate or development-based blogs that are tackling important architectural issues and projects to “surprisingly great depth.” This includes reports of design review committee meetings, include comments, views and critiques from specific committee members, and Lam sees this as a potential entry point for popular architecture criticism as it is relatable to a larger audience and broader public who has personal experience with buying and selling residential properties, and the struggles that can arise specifically in condo development projects. Lam thus sees this as
a potential “portal” to connect the public to larger architectural discussions and familiar
with architectural vocabulary.

Theodore references back to Boddy’s comment that formal criticism has never been a
“populist thing” and that historians, theorists and academics too now are focusing more
largely only urban issues rather than architecture specifically. Theodore also reference’s
Polo’s comment that Canada forgot about formalist criticism, and as such, there are few,
academic, publications on the works of some of Canada’s greatest architects including
Bing Thom and Arthur Erickson.

Chodikoff notes that one of social media’s benefits is the ability to create communities,
especially on niche topics such as silent films. For Chodikoff it is about cultivating a
community online of those interested in learning more about architecture, with positive
effect. Micallef, views these communities as “obsessive” or “nerd” communities, but in
a complimentary sense, as they allow him and others to following very specific projects
or topics such as the development of the LRT O-Train in Ottawa. They can also give a
general sense of where things are, as any false information would be called out quickly
by others. Here Blackett ties this back to Chodikoff’s comment that you write your
pieces for a few people specifically, before noting that engagement is different across
different social platforms, with different tones, and serving different purposes.
Chodikoff also notes crowd-funding opportunities that have come out of social media
campaigns
Next Blackett asks what the critics on the panel feel are the shortcomings of expressing critical views on social media, as well as the potential. Chodikoff begins by noting the speed at which images are judged on social media, giving the public unveiling of the highly controversial Chateau Laurier project as an example of a failed attempt at doing so, and which resulted in significant bad press for the project. Lam cites the “fine line” *Canadian Architect* walks in terms of working to keep the profession “on the side of the magazine and not ruffle feathers too badly.” As such, Lam notes that she has to be careful how she expresses her opinion of specific projects, including on her own personal accounts, and thus the idea of it being a free and open platform for expression may not really be the case or work, asking, “How critical can one be,” in the public arena of social media. Theodore then responds to this discussion by stating, “What I’m not comfortable with is the idea that what we want from critics is their opinions, I don’t quite think that’s how it works, and Twitter and Facebook are all about people’s opinions, so that would mark a genuine shift in what criticism is for and about, if it is about peoples’ opinions suddenly.” He also notes, in reference to the revenue model, the direct correlation between the rise of daily print newspapers and magazines and the rise of popular architecture criticism, which critics originally being paid to travel to review buildings, noting that that model is now “gone, and architectural criticism in that way will disappear with it,” and that opinions expressed on social media will not replace it.
Theodore continues, “What’s lost there that people who go to university and get educated care about is the writing about something, and whether it is about architecture or something else, what we’re not having on the social media platforms that we are on the web more broadly conceived is a place for literary writing – writing about writing, writing that people do very well – there are very few people who write well on Twitter.” Here Micallef notes the few opportunities for paid, long-form writing, and that this has resulted in critics shifting to platforms such as Twitter, in a cause-and-effect relationship, and noting that in his own column in *The Toronto Star* he only have 600-750 words allotted to him. Micallef also notes his privilege as a white male, citing the difference in responses he sees to women and people of colour on Twitter, calling it an unequal landscape. On the opposite side, Lam sees Twitter as a powerful tool “for leveraging popular opinion,” for advocating, “when the cause is right”, and revealing the role “popular outcry” can have on the course of a project. Chodikoff also notes that it can be easier to receive a response from someone for a story by tagging them in a social post, then sending an email to their inbox.

Next Blackett discusses how while the speed of our technology has increased, the speed at which architecture and city building happens has not changed. He states, “We can [now] go around the world and take photographs, and spread them really easily, and we all at home can say ‘why don’t we have that?’ [...] It is a really good source of inspiration but I think it’s something we can’t get over in our mind because of how quick our technology communication moves right now,” and suggesting that in all cities architects
and inhabitants complain about how slow things move, suggesting one of the problems is managing expectations. Blackett concludes: “New media makes us impatient for the change that we need, because city building doesn’t happen at the pace I think we all want it to happen.”

After a discussion between Blackett and Theodore regarding whether or not work within the critical landscape is more or less available and accessible, as well as active or passive, Lam comments that the resources that mass media publications have to put towards architecture criticism is finite and reducing further, leading to a question of how do you spend those resources. She cites the hour she spends on social media as an hour not spent on longer-form critiques. For Chodikoff the word is additive, however, as he sees it as a platform that can help build one’s reputation, online presence, and lead to work, and that work is still read and received based on the type of people that we are, stating: “It’s not the tools, its how us humans interpret it and how we project ourselves to others because that’s what it comes down to – its building community.”

Therefore, in summary of panel three, there is a general consensus that while digital and social media may not lead to a viable financial model or career in criticism at this time, it has opened up the practice to a much wider and popular readership and subject matter.

Among the many positive attributes accredited to digital media, in relation to popular architecture criticism are its ability to respond in real-time to projects and
developments, an increased readership and depth of audience – from the profession and those with a specialized interest to the mass public online – and acting as a bridge, that it allows experts and novices to interact and discuss on a even platform, that it can be used to test levels of interest on a topic and gauge public opinion, that it can be used to target individuals who can in turn help to create change rather than casting a wide net with ones’ writing and distribution, and that it can be used to advocate or express public outcry in certain circumstances. Moreover, it can building community around common and niche interests, increase public awareness of architecture, its criticism, and related issues, and make use of not only text, but audio and visuals as well.

Also noted during the panel is that engagement is different, with different audiences and tones, on the different platforms and that analyzing metrics and data from social media is important in being able to target the right audience. It was also reiterated that there has been a shift from architecture-centric or formalist criticism to larger urban issues and criticism at the scale of the city, and also that formalist criticism has never been a popular criticism. Other comments of note include role social media can play in creating the critics image, authority, readership – potentially lead to work and exposure of past work – and that it can also be difficult for critics to be too critical from their own online accounts and profiles in some cases, especially if connected to publications or organizations that need to be remain more neutral to the profession.
Lastly, it was also lamented that there is a sense that social media criticism is missing the quality of writing required of good criticism, and that there is often no revenue model for it, making it hard for editors to pay for content or for quality critics to or justify time spent creating it. Thus, content already created by the publication is often simply repurposed for their online channels, or reposted/shared from other publications. This however, has also opened up opportunities for lesser known or read writers and publications to have their work or publication read on a national scale.

Overall, there was generally a very positive outlook on the power of social media to create a broader and more popular reach for architecture criticism.

iv: Panel 4: *Criticism Looking Backwards: Criticism as an ongoing process*

**Moderator:** Steve Fai

**Speakers:** Trevor Boddy, Elsa Lam, Marco Polo, Lisa Rochon

Professor Fai, who begins by suggesting that popular criticism very rarely looks at projects after the time of their initial completion or revisits them in light of occupancy and time, opens the fourth panel. He indicates that while this is done with heritage projects, this is most often only after the project has reached heritage status.

Lam then starts her presentation looking at temporality in architecture criticism and how, in relation to the previous panel on social media, and the instantaneous nature of
that form, it is opening up publications to slightly broader time spans of “when they weigh in”. Lam notes that within the context of Canadian architecture criticism, the field is small enough that critics and journalists are not rushing to be the first to weigh in, giving more time for them to review before publishing. Lam also acknowledges that there is a “sweet spot” between when the building opens and has been in use for sometime, before it is reviewed, however, this is not usually years or decades later. In other cases, it is the availability of images that dictates when a project can be reviewed, according to Lam, citing the Cork Town Commons project, which as a landscape project required time to mature before it could be meaningfully critiqued and photographed. Lam also notes how within Canadian Architect, where are times where space can be allocated for ‘looking back’, such as was the case for the 60th anniversary of the magazine in 2015/16 where they dedicated the back page to revisiting past projects.

Polo is the next panelist to present and references the past discussion on academic versus popular criticism, as it is a common practice within academic criticism to look at architectural projects long after their completion, with its ties to history and theory. He notes that, “In the academic context we do a lot of historical retrospective analysis of buildings, and this is definitely a form of criticism. Its not criticism in the sense of the popular media where you are accessing something in the moment, and it tends much more to put it in a much bigger social, historical, political context, and so forth.” Polo notes that value of this form of criticism as it offers us an ability to understand what we are doing today but know what has happened in the past, as well as the ability to bring
forward buildings that might be threatened, either with demolition or transformation, 
due to the place they are at in their life cycle. This includes the current state of needing 
to preserve modern architecture, which is now reaching 50-60 years, and beyond, and 
with buildings needing large investments for renovations and maintenance. Polo states, 
“In some cases the buildings might not be particularly well loved by the public and so 
there is an effort made to understand these buildings better in an effort to bring to 
awareness their value as cultural artifacts over the longer term.”

Polo also references a phenomenon he experienced during his time as editor of 
*Canadian Architect* when he commissioned for the January 2000 issue a number of 
significant Canadian architects to identify what they thought were the most important 
buildings of the 20th century. The majority of the buildings nominated were from the 
mid-century modern period, which had previously be largely discredited, before coming 
back into favour, according to Polo. However, few project from the 80s, which had been 
celebrated during Polo’s time as a student, were included, and which he is now waiting 
to have come back into fashion. Polo sees it as a generational issue where that which is 
20-30 years old is not appreciated, independent of the work, while older projects are 
respected. This leads to Polo’s belief that retrospective reviews are important because 
they work to counteract the “arrogance of the moment” where we think we know 
better than those who came before us, and to better understand the “context, forces at 
play, the influences that shaped these buildings to be the way they are, we might not 
make these buildings now but they were made the way they were for a very good
reason, and I think it's important to note that”. Polo concludes his open presentation by referencing a recent piece in *The Globe and Mail* by Bozikovic that looks at Ontario Place and provides important context within the span of newspaper article.

Next Rochon refers to the opening panels and the question of how we define what an architecture critic is by referencing her work as the critic for *The Globe and Mail* for thirteen years, but also sees her role as including positions such as working on juries and jury leadership, exhibition, and symposia, as well as writing, and asks the audience to consider the role of the architecture critic as going beyond the written word to include roles such as educator, mediator, and interpreter, as critics “come at architecture not merely as objects in landscapes but... a social art, and we look through the branches and leaves and... when we’re lucky, we get to look at architecture not just once but over many different periods of time and through many different perspectives.” Here she discusses how when you are engaged with a building and its community over a long period of time, the opportunities to teach and educate, from different viewpoints in given. Rochon goes on to illustrate example of this practice by citing a piece she wrote in 2002 about Toronto City Hall, which was constructed in the 1960s, where Rochon looked at the social art of how the building met the street by studying the patterns of footprints in the snow coming and going from the building. Years later, Rochon helped curate an exhibition on the project, and the influence of its Finnish architect Viljo Revell. Rochon goes on to discuss different projects she has been involved, including a visit to the National Assembly by Louis Khan in Bangladesh, where her preconceived ideas and
conclusion, from images she had see or articles she had read, where changed through personal experience. These represent different ways she has been forced to reconsider architecture, as a critic, by looking back.

The final panelist to present opening remarks is Boddy who shares about his arrival in Ottawa in 1987, during the late stages of construction of both the National Gallery of Canada and Canadian Museum of civilization, which offered him the opportunity as a critic to follow the construction process, interview both architects, and step into the role as a critic of Ottawa architecture. This includes when Canadian Architect dedicated an entire issue to the National Gallery, and for which Boddy wrote a 4,809-word article about the project. Boddy notes that he is not sure if a building has had a view that long before or since in Canada, but that a project of this magnitude deserved this type of attention. He has since re-reviewed his own writing on it, as a form of reflection, and re-visited the gallery the day before the symposium as the Canadian galleries were being renovated – a part of the project he had critiqued in his original essay. Boddy follows this by noting that if a book were to proceed from the symposium, the piece he would want to write would be called, “Prodigal Critic,” which would centre on his return to Ottawa, and a re-review of the city and his own writing. Here Boddy embarks on a critique of the gallery noting the large sum that was spent on circulation spaces, including the entry and main floor ramps before stating, “But, maybe that’s important,” and suggesting he might have been too critical on this front.
Boddy also mentioned a 1989 book on Douglas Cardinal’s work, including the museum, however he notes that the galleries were not yet completed, and that this was a “big mistake” in terms of commenting on the building at that time. He also highlights the fact that both projects, as large-scale government projects, required decisions to be made quickly before the government of the day changed and that this political influence and construction process is not discussed enough in coverage of the projects or those similar in nature. From here, Boddy shares what he thinks is the best piece of architecture criticism by a Canadian, as it is about one building in-depth, written in a reflective and well-crafted manner, and by a participant-observer, which was a book on the Seagram building by Phyllis Lambert, and which was “a look back”, and going so far as to he thinks it is “the finest piece of work that [Lambert] has ever done, in any medium.”

Following this Boddy details a piece he wrote for Architecture Review in the UK which has a series that looks back at major architectural figures and their works for “critical re-evaluation” and which Boddy states, “doesn’t happen enough.” Boddy concludes by looking at critical re-evaluation as was way to try and save buildings from demolition to explain why certain “buildings matter and should stay.” He ends by stating, “There are many ways to look back.”

Fai next opens the panel by asking what role heritage designation plays in ‘looking back’, with the premise that popular criticism does not usually ‘look back,’ but with the corrective, according to Fai, that popular architecture criticism does look back. He asks if the only role is to “ring the alarm bells” around demolition. Lam responds by noting that
Canada’s heritage laws at a federal level are quite weak in their ability to save buildings as well as in terms of providing resources to preserve them. However, the “ringing of the alarm bells” is important in a popular sense to indicate heritage value for the general public, according to Lam. Polo then agrees that in terms of the retrospective criticism of mid-century heritage preservation this has been important in imparting value on such buildings that need protection. For Polo, however, there is an irony here as a main basis of the modernist movement was the “rejection of history and that we need to build for our time.” He notes the challenge with modern architecture, however, as it is form or architecture that has often lacked public support and is not easily recognized as historical and make it more difficult to discuss its heritage value due to its a-historic nature. Polo also notes that heritage designations are not given in a systematic way based on age and architectural value, pointing to the Royal Ontario Museum being given a full heritage designation to the entire building immediately following the completion Libeskind’s (much criticized) ‘Crystals’ addition, which resulted in a project of their heritage value by protecting them at the time of their origin.

From here Rochon notes that in Toronto, the two most significant modernist buildings, being Toronto City Hall, design by Revell, and the Toronto-Dominion Centre by Mies van der Rohe, were the direct result of the demolition of significant historical buildings on their respective sites during the 1960s. Rochon also refers to Toronto as a city, like others, that is successful and thus moving at a speed that does not always allow for
looking back before proceeding forward. She remarks, “Sadly, not always sadly, because not everything is great from the past, we destroy a lot in order to move forward.”

Boddy then notes that he has always acted as both an architectural historian and critic. He refers to his mentors, Reynar Banham, Kenneth Frampton, and Joseph Rykwert as all writing histories and criticism, and that they told him one will, “write better criticism if you have knowledge as a historian, you’re a better historian if you have criticality.” Boddy puts this back into the “revolving definition” of what architecture criticism is today and that criticism without historical context is “isolated, floating, unmoored.” However, he notes the difficult of doing so in Canada due to the limited “historical scholarship and critical writing” available, before noting this has changed a lot since he began work as a critic, allowing the work to now start to be possible. Boddy also points out that at the time of the symposium, only three out of the twelve accredited schools of architecture in Canada had courses on Canadian architectural history.

Fai then asks another question shifting the focus to looking back at architecture criticism itself, as opposed to the object of its criticism, before asking, “What do you think is the biggest blunder in Canadian criticism in the past 30 years?”

Boddy first cites the death of the magazine, especially within Canada. He also suggests that perhaps, “the situation in the school has something to do with the literature,” referencing the lack of Canadian architectural history courses. Rochon also references
the “impoverishment and dying out of the press,” including daily newspapers and magazines in Canada, but notes Ollie Wainwright, architecture critic for The Guardian in the UK, as sharing that it was actually the move to digital media, and the increased readership that brought to the paper, that allowed them to hire an architecture critic for the first time in twelve years. Rochon refers to this as “an explosion of readership,” and expresses her support for the previously discussed idea that “everyone’s a critic” in the age of digital media. On the other hand, for Rochon, formally trained architecture critics are also still important as, “We engage in many different levels through the written word”, but [also] through activism and as agents of social change, and through the exhibitions and books that we write,” according to Rochon. Rochon concludes with two final thoughts. First that, “Whether you’re reading it in the newspaper or looking through your Twitter feed or just ‘Googling’, people are becoming better consumers of culture and architecture,” and second that, “a lot of times the public’s aesthetic and their demand is out running even where planners, designers, architects are going.”

Polo then returns to the question posed by Fai by suggesting the biggest blunder is actually a series of blunders that he refers to as “the arrogance of the present,” as a result of the a-historicity that much of the discourse exists in. Polo admits amazement at the lack of self-criticism, lack of humility, and inability to understand that most architects, regardless of the time, do the best work they can with the information they have at that time. This “historical dismissal of what’s come from the past”, as Polo refers to it as, continues to concern him in terms of the “lack of historical consciousness”. Here
he references the film “Farwell to Oak Street” by the National Film Board of Canada, that looks at an area of Toronto that was redeveloped to help resolve its social concerns, only be redeveloped decades later to again address the same social concerns in Regent Park, with both projects thinking “now we got it right,” according to Polo. Ultimately for Polo, the “lack of historical consciousness, and the lack of humility to think that ‘those guys didn’t know everything, we might not know everything either.”

Lam then points to this thinking by the post-modernists who thought that all buildings going forward would be post-modern.

When asked by a member of the audience what the panelists wished they had known at the start of the careers as critics, Lam begins by noting the ephemeral nature of popular criticism, and that it is ok as a critic to look back on past work, revisit it, and revise your opinion on the project. Lam also shares that when she began her career she felt every piece she wrote had to be definitive, but that she wishes she had had the confidence to say that she might change her mind over time. Polo then shares that he would have told his former self to not focus only on what he thought about the work, but more so, what could he learn from it? Next Rochon discusses the pain that she has seen both architects and critics go through in light of their struggle with their work, and for expressing their opinion. Rochon also notes the male-dominated nature of the industry and wishes that she had had more women accompanying her on the journey. Lastly, Boddy notes that he wishes he had made more money from his work as a critic, and that he should have known from the time of his first article that he should have taken architectural
photography more seriously as he was paid more for one image, which was used on the cover, than he was for all of his work and travel to write the article. Boddy also notes that there are ways to make money within the business but that it is not through newspapers and magazines, but rather in cases such as his work producing catalogues for developers.

A second question from the audience asked the panelists who their favourite architecture critic was at the moment. Lam cites Alexandra Lange’s work, which spans multiple mediums including magazines, blogs, newsletters, and Instagram stating, “I admire her for her versatility.” Polo then references Reyner Banham, and his piece “A Home is Not a House,” as well as Deyan Sudjic and Jonathan Glancey. Rochon names Henri Lefebvre and his, “The Practice of the Everyday,” as an example of how to insert philosophy into popular criticism, and help close the gap between academic and popular criticism. Rochon also mentions the late John Bentley Mays who was her mentor at start of her career at The Globe and Mail as art critics, as well as Herbert Muschamp, “who could psychoanalyze the hell out of a door knob,” Paul Goldberger in his early work, and Alexandra Lange. Lastly, Boddy notes that he agrees with the above mentioned critics, as well as Michael Sorkin, before noting that no one had mentioned Ada Louise Huxtable during the symposium whom Boddy notes was, “a very good writer” as well as a “fearless and very astute advocate. She made things happen in her city, and not happen.”
The third question from the audience focused on what students should know if they want to enter careers in architectural writing. Boddy begins by suggesting to look for work writing for developers or architectural firms, and Rochon follows this with the under appreciated importance of strong writing skills. Polo then takes the question in a different direction, focusing on the importance of significant research, understanding that historical interpretations change with time as we project our values onto it, and thus requiring a need to read history critically. Lam then stresses the importance of primary sources, whether that’s photographs, blue prints, writings (“read them with a grain of salt and an understanding that time in which they were written”), or the building itself (which one also must do “archeological work” on to understand how it may have changed in the intervening time between it being built and the present day, including the surrounding context). And, as Lam concludes, “if you do go to a place, spend some time there”. Boddy then adds, in reference to modern architectural history, that whenever possible, speak with the people involved themselves as “they’ll open up doors and mention things... When it’s living history its really, really interesting.”

Therefore, in summary of panel four, three themes arise: Temporality, self-reflection, and historical awareness. On the theme of temporality, it is noted that due to the size of the pool of critics in Canada, and the geographical size of the country, there is little rush for critics to weigh in on a project, as no one is going to ‘scoop’ them. This gives more time, in theory, for the critic to do their research, become familiar with the building, and allow for some occupational use to happen before giving an appraisal. This is seen as a
positive, and relates to the stressed importance of following a project through from
design and construction to completion and then use, as well as the importance of
engaging with a building overtime and importance of experiencing a building first hand
as a critic.

In regards to self-reflection and critical re-evaluation, the importance of looking back
not only on projects but self-reflection by the critic of their own work is stressed at
multiple points. And while the dangers of commenting on a building before it is
completed is shared, there is a reminder to the emerging critic that it is permissible to
not have a definitive critique at the time of publication and realize that one’s opinion
can change and be revised with time and future reflection and information.

Lastly, the significance of historical awareness, knowledge and research, when writing
popular criticism, is referenced throughout the panel. This is due to the fact that the
relationship between writing architectural history and architecture criticism is such that
one informs the other, and the belief that knowledge about architecture history is
needed to be able to write meaningful critiques. As a result, lessons learned from past
works that can inform how we build now and going forward, can provide context and
help us understand the influences that were at play then, and possibly still. It is pointed
out that this has been difficult from a Canadian perspective as there is a lack of
publications and courses on the history of Canadian architecture criticism; however,
these are starting to become more available. Thus the panelists stress the importance of research, interviews, and searching for primary sources when writing criticism.

Related, it was noted that while academic criticism is much more likely to “look back” from a historical and/or theoretical perspective, the role and ability for the popular critic to ring the “alarm bells” around heritage demolition, and to share architectural and heritage value with the lay public was noted.

And thus the three themes interrelate for the time needed for self-reflection of both a project and its review allows for historical layers to be added, and the time needed to research write a meaningful critique are allowed due to the unique temporality of Canadian criticism. Self-reflection is only possible with time, and historical layers can only be added with its passing as well. The time needed to look back is both time for reflection and new knowledge, and historical awareness can give grounding for the writing and its future review.

v. Panel 5: Case Study: Mirvish + Gehry Toronto – The critical response

Moderator: Maria Cook

Speakers: Trevor Boddy, Alex Bozikovic, Lisa Rochon

As a case study that involved many of the issues discussed in the panels preceding it, the Mirvish+Gehry Toronto project was explored in regards to the critical response it received. This panel asked the questions: For what reasons was the professional critic
mostly marginalized? Were the critics’ responses justified? And in what ways was the public response responsible for the final design?

After an initial overview of the project by moderator Maria Cook, Cook asks the question, “What role architecture critics played in this, and what was the role of public pressure and opinion?” Cook then lays the foundation for the discussion by noting that the critics, including panelists Bozikovic and Rochon, gave “qualified support” for the project, while the public was “much less enthusiastic.

“We are interested in what this case study stays about criticism today, and the relationship between professional critics and the general public, and the role architecture critics played in how this unfolded,” Cook notes.

Rochon, who is a supporter of the project, made evident in her opening remarks and a position she defends throughout the panel, then opens by noting her fascination of the case study, and the number of issues it raises, including how much ‘power’ architecture critics should assume. For Rochon, the when the critic weighs in, it is not an indication of whether a project should go a certain way, for while critics can influence developers and the City, Rochon believes it would be naïve to think the critic is a singular position to be considered when there are many voices and players involved in the complex decisions that affect cities.
In terms of the project specifically, Rochon notes that Gehry was coming off of a ‘honeymoon’ relationship with Toronto from the success of his renovation of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) a few years prior. However, it is noted that Gehry considered the AGO project as a ‘reno job’ as opposed to a singular new build ‘fresh from the ground’, such as Bilbao was. Thus in order for him to be able to express his creativity and exuberance fully, eliminating the warehouses and theatre “‘held no problem for him”, according to Rochon. However, she conceded that, “Apparently Frank [Gehry] and David Mirvish are content with this new iteration.”

This leads Cook to ask critically, “Why would critics support a proposal, by a single developer, which goes against the urban design plan for the city of Toronto, its zoning bylaws, destroys heritage buildings and a theatre, in order to bring in condos and luxury shopping? What are the values at play here?”

Here Bozikovic first indicates that the original position he took on the project has changed, and that he has questioned his own criticality. Bozikovic responds, “That is an excellent question. And that was not the set of questions that I was asking when this thing was first unveiled [...] I didn’t really approach it critically at the time.” However, this sense of a change in position, or at least a challenging of it, is not shared by Rochon who is still impressed by the “audacity” of the project and its “exhilarating architecture,” compared to the often cited banality and sameness of Toronto’s condo developments that line much of the skyline currently. Rochon explains that Gehry’s concept has the
“promise of something iconic” for her, but that she also had reservations, four of which she wrote about, including the human disconnect in tall towers, sustainability after 30 storeys and asking if the project is “just a play to the ego”. Rochon explains that she was “questioning the greed around why, if you want to showcase your art collection, why do you need to do 90 storeys?” However, Bozikovic is quick to interrupt her asking if she really did write about all of those concerns, in those words, as he did not remember her doing so.

This is the first challenge to Rochon’s position, and her lack of a change in perception in her writing about it since the initial launch. Rochon clarifies that, “No I don’t think I used the word greed at that time,” to which Bozikovic reiterated stating, “No I don’t think you did.” This sense of lacking a needed critical eye and voice toward the project is further expounded on by Bozikovic when he states that neither him nor Rochon, or many of the other critics who looked at the project provided a “critical questioning of the basis of the scheme,” as, “The details got kind of overlooked in this initial flashy unveiling of the project.”

Bozikovic explains that a piece he wrote approximately a year after the unveiling in October 2012 starts to better examine the project and its potential areas of concern, after initially being excited about the “quality of the building,” as Rochon was. Yet, even here Bozikovic is continually prefacing any qualifying comments of praise with comments of caution, such as when he states, “I remain excited about the quality of it.
Gehry can do -although he has rarely- he can do a very good high rise.” He goes to explain that he questions the site and scale of the project, the financial intentions behind it, and even its form.

This leads Cook to interject a question, asking Bozikovic how he challenged the project with his writing, if there were concerns he had about it, to which he re-cites his 2013 piece noting that while he did not say it was a “bad idea” he started to look at the project from more of an urban design and planning perspective, rather than focusing on its architecture, “Because I think we’d agree that the quality of the architecture is going to be good, and that’s not really what’s in question,” before detailing the “murky” nature of Toronto’s planning process and history.

Cook here again redirects the conversation back to the critics’ role and impact on the case study, especially in relation to public reaction when they support or challenge a project as controversial at this. She first singles out Bozikovic specifically: “Looking at one of your first articles [where he writes] ‘The complex could making an exciting impact on the city,’ [and] ‘Mr. Mirvish has made important contributions to the city,’ [along with] reference to the ‘brilliant Mr. Gehry’ [and stating] ‘He’s arguably the greatest living architect’.”

After asking the same to Bozikovic’s predecessor at The Globe, Rochon explains that she was trying to express the opportunity that a Gehry building could be for Toronto, and as
a way to rethink the banality of Toronto’s condo stock, with the projects punched windows and curved form, which to her “held a lot of bravery”. However, here Rochon exposes the opinion of the nature of the critic’s work when she states:

“But of course writing these pieces [...] you have to be a booster, a civic booster, and sort of push, but not be naïve. And I also sort of knew that what was being proposed would never actually get approved. And I thought that that was... you know it’s like in class actions the ask for this and might get that. There is a whole dialogue. And so I think my role as an architecture critic in this case was to provide some energy and fuel and encourage the daring and at the same time I had reservation. Some deep reservations.”

Here Bozikovic quickly draws a distinction of opinion on this understanding of the role of the critic sharing that he fundamentally disagrees with the idea that the role of the popular critic is is to be a “booster.” Yet he does acknowledge that this boosterism can happen innocently as critics innately love the city and the built environment, otherwise they wouldn’t be doing what they do. He admits that the his and the other critic’s enthusiasm for the project contributed to the public’s support of it, helping to give political traction for the project. He notes Mirvish’s public talks including the Empire Club, where the argument that Toronto was not brave enough for a Gehry building was repeated, and that this was wrongly being used to justify the scale of the project despite there being no “reason why this thing needs to be as big as it is, and there was never an argument about how big it should be.” This allows Bozikovic to explain that this allowed
his thinking to shift to a questioning of the impact the project would have at an urban level in terms of his approach months after its launch, suggesting though that it was “not as clearly or as early as I would have liked,” and that he thinks that he “kind of missed the boat on this.” And he explains that while he would still like to see the project happen in some form, this critical questioning of its impact is important as it will set a massive precedent for the neighbourhood, city, and Toronto’s planning process. He gives the example that other developers are already asking to exciting current zoning heights, and while not necessarily asking for 92-storeys, they are also not working Frank Gehry (suggesting a lack of architectural integrity in these other projects).

He also notes that in reality, however, these processes are all political – despite what the critics say, as it’s the city councillors who vote, not the planners. This leads to a discussion about Hume, who was unable to attend the event, and the column he wrote about Toronto’s Chief Planner, Jennifer Keesmaat, implying she was a ‘hick’ for raising objections to the project, and having worked in smaller cities prior to her role in Toronto. Bozikovic refers to this as “not [Hume’s] finest hour,” for mocking her critical thinking and resultant objects to the project, and shares that in his opinion this was “really the opposite of what we as critics should have been doing in this circumstance,” as, “architecture criticism can’t only be formal criticism. And even if that is one’s bent, then one has to be aware of the impact that a project great as it may be in purely architectural terms and purely formal terms, the impact that it is having on the city is just as much a part of the story – arguably a bigger part of the story than the fact of
Coming back to Rochon, she again references the multiple, “fascinating undercurrents” of the project including the Mirvish legacy, his sense of entitlement (thinking he could have the first, “audacious to nth degree”, proposal approved, including the flattening of the theatre and warehouses), questions around the need for its height, and the building of condos for the super elite despite Toronto’s affordable housing crisis. She concludes that there are, “many different layers and many different parties and organizations weighing in, and I think the architecture critics contribute one voice.”

At this point, Boddy, who is from Vancouver, BC on Canada’s west coast, is brought into the conversation to share his perspective as one that is slightly removed from the local thought patterns on it. Boddy begins by agreeing with Bozikovic that while he agrees the Hume was out of line for his comment in reference to Keesmaat, he also thinks that the architecture critics are being given too much credit for their influence on the result of the project.

Boddy also introduces an interesting conceptual argument about the Mirvish+Gehry project being a direct reaction and response to Toronto’s self-perceived banality and timidity, architecturally speaking, that has led to previous celebrity-branded, statement architecture including Will Alsop’s OCAD University building with its “Lots of colour, lots of form”, and Daniel Libeskind’s addition to the Royal Ontario Museum
(ROM). For Boddy, “the rise of celebrity architecture reportage, it’s not even criticism,” and, “That discourse pre-figures all this.”

In regards to the critical response Mirvish+Gehry received in Vancouver, Boddy notes that the three towers were mockingly referred to as Larry, Joe, and Curly Moe, before sharing that the Vancouver development community, including Westbank (who would go on to purchase the project), did not think Mirvish was being “real” at first with the proposal as it was present – indicating that it was meant to be a stunt to bid up the price of the land before selling and investing in the Honest Ed’s site (which would in reality be sold by Mirvish to finance his Gehry project).

Boddy then attacks the underpinning of the majority of Hume’s writings, being that the project should be critically accepted based off the name and previous work of the architect alone, by stating, “I think Gehry is one of the most critically overrated architects of all time... The number of significant buildings he’s done, like Bilbao, like the Disney Concert Hall – love them – but go look at EMP in Seattle, there’s a lot of dreadful Gehry buildings...”

He then concludes by returning to his initial comment about the over credited role of the popular critic adding, “We can be traffic cops, standing there, holding our flashlights, pretending we’re directing the traffic, but I think there are bigger forces at work here,” before predicting that the project will never be built.
Bozikovic agrees with Boddy about the critic’s limited influence, and notes that it is especially true in this instance as a Gehry project, as Gehry is most likely the only living architect that the public at large would know by name and reputation, and thus, “a building like this is obviously flashy, and in a way that is obviously exciting and doesn’t need to be particularly explained. So, if there hadn’t been all of this critical cheerleading for this project, I’m not quite sure that the public perception would have been all that different,” Bozikovic states. This leads to suggest that the planning process and ultimate outcome would also most likely not have been different.

Bozikovic summarizes his view on the influence of writing in this instance sharing, “I think the influence of the critic matters a lot more where Frank Gehry is not involved. Let’s put it that way – as ironic as that is. I think this is maybe the one sort of case where the criticism really didn’t matter that much.”

This leads to a comment from the audience where it is suggested by Bridgette Desrocher that Boddy and Bozikovic painted a bigger picture of the “strategic positioning, financial component, social perception, political maneuvering, [and] the market” that come into play in a project such as this, similar to a political campaign “being unveiled and strategized.” She then suggests that this game also needs to be played by the critics suggesting that, “There is a huge amount of thinking and strategizing your own persona within that bigger field which you have to do to be a
credible player. [And you] need credibility to eventually influence the game.”

Continuing to look at influence, and when asked by Cook about whether there was an example of something she wrote that could show changed things and had influence, Rochon responded: “I can’t measure these things exactly, but I do know after that particular critique [referring to another project], which angered the developers, I think that they then later, probably because of a number of circumstances and pressures, they hired better architects.” Parts of it were then much improved, city benefited according to Rochon. Boddy agrees: “Critical ideas and critical language can make a big difference.”

Bozikovic is then also asked when he has seen his criticism lead to influence, to which he responded that it is largely when he writes about emerging firms that receive promotional support from his writing, before adding, “But I think potentially where the biggest impact is in precisely this kind of discussion – the promotion of development projects, the political campaigning for development permissions, which are again so murky and which benefit from positive public response which can influence public consultation and which can influence the political process in getting developments of a particular size and scale approved. [But] I think that is the one really clear place where there might be the option to do that.”

Cook closes the panel with a final question regarding the rhetoric surrounding the
project, including Gehry’s references to the project as a cloud, a waterfall, and asking how this contributes to the discussion?

Rochon concludes with a surprisingly critical questioning of the project stating: “As critics, we have to move and outsmart sometimes the [architect’s] language. [Critics need to] delve into the language and get past it. Be detectives and sleuths – really try to think clear headedly about implications – not just for David Mirvish and his pocket book or Frank Gehry’s career – but also we have to think about what does this mean for the city? And at the same time recognizing that city politicians want their city to be the next ‘it’ city, they need to generate global fascination for their city,” indicating a very different message and tone than she was giving at the beginning of the panel.

vi. Roundtable: *The future of popular architecture criticism in Canada*

**Moderator:** Sarah Gelbard

**Speakers:** Ian Chodikoff, Sophie Girronay, Elsa Lam, Rhys Phillips, David Theodore

The final panel is a roundtable that brings together the speakers and themes from the previous five panels for a more casual conversation, moderated by Sarah Gelbard. Gelbard begins by noting that the concept of the symposium as ‘pop’, ‘can’, and ‘crit’, with the ‘crit’ or ‘critical’ having been widely addressed “directly and continuously” in the other panels. Thus Gelbard frames two different discussion points on the ideas of ‘pop’ and ‘can’, beginning with ‘pop’ or ‘popular’. This leads to a comment about her
own work, and the fact that the most publically popular or read piece she has written in the past year, was also the most unpopular amongst the architectural profession, or at least as received through the professional architectural associations. This leads to a questioning of the criticism of architecture but also the “criticism of the professionalization of architecture” and when architecture criticism either enforces or challenges the definition of architecture that the profession has for it. This is most specific to unheard and underrepresented voices and talent in architecture, and the role criticism can play in “giving those voices a place” and representing not only the grand projects of capital ‘A’ architecture, but also small ‘a’ architecture. Specifically, Gelbard highlights women in architecture and “the role critics play in bringing that to light,” and asks how critics are giving voice to biodiversity and gendered voices, with the second part looking at “smaller architectures” and the ways we engage in architecture both inside and outside of the profession.

Lam begins by addressing the role of women in architecture and the way critics can address the issues, indicating that it is a cause that she has be “trying to champion” in both overt and subtle ways as editor. This includes, editorials, books reviews, commissioned pieces that look at employment equity and the gender gap in the profession, participating in related panels and connecting the various networks across the country that are working on these issues, as well as when she is choosing writers for pieces to ensure balance in the writing.
Next, Chodikoff references a ‘Women in Design’ panel that IIDEX will be hosting in December 2016, and the response it has already received and relationships or alliances it has resulted in, such as connecting him to Building Equality in Architecture Toronto (BEAT), and Canadian Association of Women in Construction. Chodikoff also shares that he has personally witnessed “disturbing situations” related to gender inequity over the past years, in “high echelons”, suggesting it is a “condition that is still alive and well today”. Chodikoff also notes other biases in the profession including in regards to foreign-trained architects, but stating that we do not need to accept such biases. He also notes that he has worked to advocate for women leadership in architecture, whether through the juries, task forces, or panels he is on, to try and be a representative of those voices. Chodikoff states, “As a critic you can have a bit of that distantiation from being a professional, where as being a critic you can maybe come out and hopefully state some of those unstatable, unmentionables to try and get people at least be keyed into the fact that we’re living in the 21st century we should therefore respect professionals as such [...] I think as critics we need to be mindful of that, and mindful of other gender and equity issues as well.

Phillips then notes that this is not the topic he had planned to be speaking to in the roundtable, after which Girronay is heard in the background saying, “We need it,” before sharing that he wrote and developed that cabinet submission that established the Federal Employment Equity Act, followed by 35 years enforcing the Act, noting two passions came together in the article he has written on the topic for Canadian Architect.
Phillips references the low retention and promotion rates of women in architecture in Canada. Thus his article does an employment systems review, and looks at identifying the barriers, and Philips notes that it is now big firms operate, and not the education or licensing system, that needs to work to dismantle these barriers. The article puts forward what constitutes a good employment equity plan and how to use the model to create change.

Girronay challenges this idea that writing articles about issues such as gender inequities in a profession is the responsibility of the critic, after indicating that she thought the discussion would be about what needs to happen in architecture criticism now, and despite indicating that she has written such articles while not looking at projects through a gender lens from a critical review standpoint, stating, “I never had this way of looking at things.” However, Girronay self-reflects that is has only been women who have hired her to write for papers, saying she is not sure if this is significant or not, but that there also gender inequities within the media and papers as well. She shares, “Now, I am beginning to think that’s why architecture criticism is not a serious subject for editors.” Girronay notes that the editor of La Presse at the time is passionate about hockey but not architecture, while the culture section editor who hired Girronay and decided to dedicate a page to architecture was a woman. Girronay then clarifies that she believes that the topic should be dealt with in trade publications and not as a public subject in the popular press stating, “What happens inside the profession is not really the problem of journalists”. Social issues affecting architecture, including poverty,
housing shortages, and poor urban design are topics she believes can be addressed by the critic in a more general sense.

Chodikoff references the passing of Zaha Hadid the summer prior and the often-shocking coverage it received, evidencing a double standard in much of the commentary, in relation to her gender. “It was not the death of an architect, but the death of a female architect,” in terms of how it was presented by the media according to Chodikoff. Gelbard also notes how Hadid was often used as an example of a famous female architect and that that was often used to suggest that there is not a gender gap issue in architecture. From here Chodikoff brings it back to Gelbard’s bigger question about those under-represented or classed as illegitimate, whether based on gender, ethnicity, place of training, or status of licensure, as well as what qualifies someone to comment or critique, create change, or build change in relation to the built environment. Here Chodikoff asks what the role of the critic is in helping to create an inclusive and empowered environment for “game changers” and asking, “What’s the role of the critic to foment an inclusive environment to allow the dialogue from the entire spectrum to flourish at whatever level.”

Gelbard clarifies that the question currently looking to be answered is the role of architecture critics critiquing the profession, while using that critique to also evaluate their own profession as critics, most specifically in instances of under-represented voices and works in architecture.
Theodore takes this opportunity to note the distinction between architecture as a discipline and architecture as a profession, which is regulated by the provincial associations, and which he refers to as “pretty nuts” as they are intended for the protection of the public and not architects, as is the case in most professions. He then notes that in relation to architecture the discipline, he is not sure if it is the tool to solve issues such as poverty. Theodore states, “The question is much, much more complicated than what critics can do. Critics can’t do very much in that role. If you actually want to do something, you go down the street and you do something. Designing a building is not going to make that kind of a difference. Sorry, commenting on the design of a building. The buildings already been built. What difference can you make to it whether the buildings good or not?”

Chodikoff then states that he disagrees, explaining that the architect is not going to design a building that will change society, but that the architect will be “working with a group of people that can potentially contribute to a changing society.” He acknowledges that while the architect is not the ultimate arbiter of social change, they, and others within the profession, can play a role and that the architecture critic needs to be aware of this while promoting the fact that the architect is one member of a group that are important players in creating change. This leads to Chodikoff noting the previous panel on the Mirvish+Gehry project, stating that Gehry is not the only player in the project. He ends by suggesting that we should be more “nimble about creating a more inclusive
environment for all aspects of people interested in architecture, but at the same time, embed our architects within a game changing team of society and not feel that architects have to be the pinnacle of it.”

Phillips then asks to bring the discussion back to the first word of popular. He shares that he came to the symposium with the idea that the profession of popular criticism was in a state of palliative care, noting that many involved in the panel are involved at a more intellectual or academic level that will continue, but that in terms of a broad popular architecture criticism, “it’s miniscule within the Canadian dialogue. However, Phillips believes that within popular media as a whole, the built environment will only continue to receive more coverage due to the role it plays in the economy, but that this will be at the level of a journalist discussion (i.e. neighbourhood debates, etc.) and will include images without citing the architect(s) in the papers. Here Phillips shares a historical perspective of Toronto with the urban critic Jane Jacobs writing in the 1970s from an external perspective, but who worked with Jack Diamond as an architect to help bring about Toronto’s ‘world-class’ recognition as a city. Next he references the work of Winnipeg-based architecture firm 5468796 Architecture, and the dedication they have paid to the city in creating it, and which has in turn lead to international coverage and ultimately the people of Winnipeg starting to talk about design. This leads to Phillips challenging the profession to better engage and help lead, as, “it’s the only way that we as critics will get a chance to start to come in and start meeting that process.” He notes
the public role architects have in Scandinavian countries including Finland and Denmark and are out leading the work, so that critics can come in and join in that process.

This leads Gelbard to open the discussion to the audience, where Bridgette Desrochers references Phillips notion of the public and societal role of the architect in order to, “look at the margins of this panel of critics in a political way,” and suggests that *Spacing* magazine is a new form of critical journalism as it is not critical, it is “all positive” and builds a love for the city, and suggesting that it is an “anti-criticism in a way.” Desrochers also then references the work of 5468796 Architecture as a form of “anti-criticism” that creates public interest with positive energy, before framing the question as, “I would ask you, would any of you accept that this might be the future of criticism?”

Girronay disagrees, suggesting it is one aspect, and while there has been optimism shared about the potentials of academic or digital criticism, if you want to be a traditional newspaper critic, “you have another job to do.” She notes her interest in the previous panel, despite is appearing as a discussion between Torontonians, as there are now phenomena that are “crying out to be treated by journalists, by investigating journalists, and we need that absolutely to look at how the things get built, why those [are the ones that] get built instead of those, why these decisions were made, and the processes are rather complicated. The time to have interviews with Frank Gehry or hype architects and advocate for star architects is now I think over, its still interesting and its good for the critic who signs articles – I interviewed such and such – and its better for
your career also so there is a tendency to go on doing that, but the work to do now is to go deeper, so yes it is really good to have *Spacing*, that kind of positive look at the city, it opens the eyes of a lot of the people, give them the habit of looking around them, and that’s the first thing you have to encourage people to look around them and not be passive in front of what they are seeing is taking shape, but then you have to develop a critic[al] mind just as in the job of a journalist [...] you have a job to do as a journalist, so in architecture I think it’s going into urban planning, urban decisions, and corruption also.” Here Girronay sites corruption issues related to commissions in Quebec that she wanted to report on in collaboration with other journalists from her paper with other specialties in order to denounce things that she saw but were not within her field, which she regrets.

Lam references that the Canada Council for the Arts is present at the event, and adds that one of the roles of the critic that has not been addressed is the place of Canadian architecture on the international stage and building a reputation and image for Canadian architecture as “an important form of national cultural identity.” Lam sees it as more than just an article but rather a “full discourse around what Canadian architecture is, that is presented in a journalistic way and not in a, ‘oh, these buildings are so great’ kind of way necessarily. It’s a slow job but it’s part of a broader agenda that we are all involved in as critics.”
The discussion then transitions to the ‘can’ or ‘Canadian’ component of the event. Gelbard notes that the question of what is Canadian architecture was one of great interest in the 1960s, and that in light of Canada’s sesquicentennial approaching in 2017, there is a lot of looking back at the centennial in 1967, and the architecture it produced, leading to the bigger question of how Canadian identify is defined through architecture.

Chodikoff begins by suggesting the country is very different than it was in 1967 as well as it was in 1987 due to different demographics and diversity, connectivity to the rest of the work, and the more cosmopolitan world. He notes that there are “many lenses” or voices present on the panel that can look at the question and the idea of a national architecture policy – whether from a formalist, historicist, business or other perspective, including for a global export perspective looking to increase the work of Canadian architects abroad. Thus trying to recreate the conditions of 1967 would be only nostalgic and retrograde according to Chodikoff, and thus an future policy should focus on the successes we have had as a diverse nation, as well as our competitive advantages from a practical, strategic point of view, suggesting this is the case for other national architecture policies as well.

For Phillips, what is important for 2017 would not be the construction of an iconic building or buildings, as was the aim in 1967, but rather important architectural infrastructure such as the Danish Architects Centre in Denmark, which does research,
promotion, event sponsorship among others, and which has worked to make Danish architecture an important export. Phillips concludes by noting it is this type of infrastructure that Canada is lacking.

Next Lam references a grant-based artist project called Image Cloud that allows you to type in text in a search bar and it then translate the text into twenty languages before searching for images in all twenty of these languages. Lam uses this as an indicator of the world views Canadian Architecture by searching for it, and has noted an increase in the variety, regionality, and quality of the projects that are now coming resulting from the search, and as an image of Canadian architecture.

Gironnay then speaks to past opportunity her gallery, la Maison de l’architecture du Québec, had to present Quebec architecture to a European audience in France. As the exhibit had not yet been created, they had the opportunity to decide what they would present and how they would frame it. She noted it was snow, and how Quebec deals with the relationship between snow and architecture that would make them different internationally, as a northern European country, but specific ways that relate to the landscape that differentiates them from other European northern countries and regions – rather than looking at one building that has received acclaim, and thus more about the collective.
Phillips references an article he did on winter cities, and the work that is going on in Edmonton and is being driven by a succession of mayors, and which is now affecting all aspects of the city from its urban design and architecture, to how it’s lit at night and building guidelines relevant to how you design for the winter. Phillips then notes the interesting fact that this has all been political driven, and that there are no critics working in the city currently that he is aware of. Phillips states, “I think actually one of the most important things that is going to lead the Canadian built environment is the quality of your mayor.”

Gelbard then clarifies the question for Theodore as, “What part of Canada plays into the future of Canadian criticism?” to which he responds by stating that the two issues that Canada has not yet properly addressed, but will need to do so and that will in turn affect many things is climate change and truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. Theodore then states, “And we are not even close to getting any kind of conversation going that will seriously change those things. And again, architects don’t have much power in those things, the building industry is much more powerful than the architectural profession, and critics criticising architects for their sustainability or non-sustainability is not getting anywhere close to what we need to be doing to tackle climate change issues. So it would be wonderful to think that there could be some way that architects could symbolically do some projects that deal with those two subjects that open up dialogues around inclusiveness and underrepresentation and so on. Go for it.”
The floor is opened to questions and the first is in relation to the future of criticism more generally, with the audience member suggesting that its future is bleak due to the limitations on freedom of speech whether in a classroom, as a member of the public, or a journalist at a paper, leading it to be increasingly difficult to be a critic. They suggest it is not enough for criticism to be constructive or critically constructive, but that it must off a counter voice, before putting the question of whether there really is a future for criticism.

Chodikoff offers that he, and suggests that many in the room, agree with the sentiment, and that increasingly within Western society, there is a fear of “stepping on someone’s toes.” He thinks this may be part of the process in becoming more inclusive to a more diverse variety of voices, but that its important to hold on to the ability to be critical in a constructive way, and in critical in a way that encourages thinking and critical thought.

Theodore follows by saying that “critical thinking has its place, but it shouldn’t be everywhere.” He also suggests that such criticism can focus on a building in particular, but he is unsure how an 800-word newspaper column could address something as complex as a political system.

Chodikoff counters this by noting that a policy that might be affecting housing and in turn the design of a public space are all interconnected. He states that, just as those in
the room are not in a bubble, society is made up of many different constituents and stakeholders and that in acknowledging that, “we as architecture critics want to embed ourselves within all those other stakeholders, whether its through social media, or whether its through broadening our audience, we might have achieved some critical impact blindly or implicitly or otherwise.”

Theodore counters this by suggesting that those in the room are in a bubble and the group assembled is not representative of Canadian across the country. He asks, “Do we have a responsibility because we are in that bubble,” before concluding that “that’s a different kind of discussion,” while reiterating that he still does not understand how the writing of a critical review of a building can address matters outside of the ‘bubble’, regardless of where it is published.

Chodikoff addresses this by sharing the example of an article he might write for Canadian Architect being read by a city councillor that might in turn effect a city or community project. This has also been the case for Chodikoff when writing about heritage issues and that influenced a community. “And they’re tiny things,” he states, “but you give out to something and someone else with amplify it, and someone else will. It’s not as though you as the critic are going to be universally and uniquely responsible to change the universe. But you can add to the conversation in a constructive way.”
Theodore returns to the question of being critical as a form of critical reflection, and suggests that *Spacing* and Table for 1200 by 5468796 Architecture are celebrations as opposed to criticisms. Theodore also refers to curated gallery exhibitions as entertainment as opposed to the same level of criticism when looking at something such as truth and reconciliation. He states, “To say that we should be up to doing that kind of stuff, we’re in a bubble and how do we break out of that just because we write something? It just seems way too hard.”

Phillips suggests that the biggest bubble or ‘elephant in the room’ was previously addressed by Boddy when he noted that there is no panel that asks the questions of whether you can make a living as an architecture critic. He suggests that this is not possible today, save for a very small percentage who do not also teach or work in other ways as well, and that this is only getting smaller. Phillips also notes that the majority of his writing now is no longer popular criticism but rather for trade publications.

Chodikoff notes that even for critics who write 700-word columns, they usually also serve or task forces, urban design review panels, produce films, and/or curate exhibitions. However, he notes that in this case, it is the writing of the article that leads to other positions. Chodikoff then suggests that anyone can be a critic without having the opportunity to write formally for a paper, before Girronay questions whether you can really be a “pop can critic” if so. Girronay then explains that her aim is always to be read by the larger public and that it’s different from other jobs. Girronay then notes the
larger shifts in popular criticism that has seen a reduction in critics across genres. She also acknowledges that going into the symposium she felt that it is almost impossible to be a serious, knowledgeable critic in the cultural fields today, as it is mostly focused on a consumeristic rating of whether something is “good or bad, don’t go, go.” However, in light of the days discussions she shares that she is feeling more optimistic as, “you just killed the critic and then they are cropping up from all over, and you cannot have them silenced. It’s not possible.” So while the critic is dying or disappearing, according to Girronay, there a new ways in which the important work of what shapes the city is happening, however without the ability to earn a serious living from it. Next she notes that in order to critique architecture, especially within the context of the rest of the world, you have to be able to travel – something architecture critics cannot afford to do.

A second question from the audience suggests to look at the work of Jane Rendell and the new narratives or ways of looking at things she suggests and that it opens up criticism past the “good and the bad and ugly”. The audience member also cites the New Times Article “Discussing the Undiscussable.” They suggest that all work has a critical dimension to it.

Theodore responds by stating that there are all sorts of ways to open things up, and that this is fun and makes us want more, but that the question was about criticism and how you do it. Thus, if you want to call everything criticism, according to Theodore, that opens it up, however, the question was about a certain kind of writing and reflection on
a specific artefact, in this case, a building. Theodore agrees that there are other things we should be doing, and that are fun to do, but that ultimately, “to call all of the criticism is not helping us define what the role of criticism might be.”

Here Gelbard suggests that the question is why we are prioritizing writing as the most significant form of criticism, as opposed to critical art, critical practice, and others. Theodore agrees that there are other forms of criticism, and that the definition can be expanded, but asks why that would be done. Gelbard responds stating that critical writing is already only one form or one box of many that can be opened up. Theodore responds by noting that the disappearance of newspaper critics, as referenced by Girronay, has very little to do with the other forms of criticism, and that as architecture critics are disappearing, other forms, which we can be open to, are not the same category being discussed. Theodore states, “The issue of what is critical and how you get at the criticals of the system, if somebody can do that in other than language, that would be amazing.”

Lam contributes to this discussion by sharing that what is unique about written criticism, and what distinguishes it from other forms of criticism, is that fundamentally, writing is a way of organizing and structuring ideas on a page. Lam states, “It feels to me like writing is actually a special category of criticism that enables other kinds of criticism to happen [...] you need writing as a fundamental critical thinking skill.”
Girronay agrees saying, “It is easier to think when you can write.”

Philips also notes that there can be other forms of criticism, but as someone outside of the academy and profession of architecture, it is important to remember that architecture is a functional art, as opposed to the intellectual art of something such as a play. We live and work in architecture, we walk beside architecture, and “it defines how we live in the comfort of lives,” and thus anyone who critiques how buildings effect urban life is as much of a critic as someone who critiques Frank Gehry as a “form giver.” Thus architecture critics have to balance between the function/impact and the aesthetics of any given project, more akin to a car critic than an art critic.

The final question from the audience centres on the concept of ‘fun’ in architecture criticism. Chodikoff notes that is depends on the panellist you ask, and that he has been told that there is no fun in architecture – that it is too serious – despite personally thinking humour is an excellent way to convey a message or develop a narrative. Phillips notes the opportunity he had to develop architectural editorial cartoons, and Gironnay notes that it is easier to humour when you are being “vicious” than when you want to invoke love for a project, and Chodikoff then asks if the bigger question is not how to be humourous but rather how to be humane. Lastly, Theodore references Ian Martin, who is a TV comedy writer and stand up comedian who writes for Architects Journal and has turned his humour towards architecture, backed by extensive knowledge of the discipline. Theodore ends by stating, “Humour is very bad in architecture criticism.
because we do not know how to write jokes, and that’s a real skill that takes more time than we have on deadlines. And also, whenever I put jokes in, people like Elsa [Lam] take them out.” And with that, the panel concludes.

Therefore, in summary of the roundtable, there are two points of focus presented: the ‘POP’ or popular and ‘CAN’ or Canadian context or the symposium, with the belief that the ‘CRIT’ or critical aspects have been extensively looked at in the proceeding panels.

Beginning with the popular or public aspect of such criticism, the role of critic is questioned in relation to equity and diversity, including the role of the critic in critiquing the profession and its own profession in regards to under-represented voices and works of architecture – suggesting a two tier system of capital ‘A’ architecture and small ‘a’ architecture – and the role it can play in addressing and rectifying such injustices. This is said to include women in architecture, diversity in the field, the acceptance of foreign-trained architects, among other inequities. Whether the critic can, or should, work to help dismantle such barriers however, is disagreed upon by the panelists. This includes whether the critic can address social issues, such as poverty and housing, as it is considered to be too late by some to create change after the building has been built. Others, however, disagree and believe that the critic is part of a larger team that can create change together through their various roles, working to create a more inclusive environment in the profession and field. It also claimed that the critic could state some of the ‘unmentionables’ about the profession as they are slightly removed from it.
In regards to the state of popular criticism, however, it appears to be a shared belief that it is in a state of demise or death, while intellectual and digital criticism is flourishing. For while newspaper critics are disappearing, critics on other mediums, and of other forms of critical practice are rapidly appearing. This leads to the question of whether this is simply a shift, and what has or is being lost, gained, or transferred in the process. There is also the repeated notion that criticism and public interest in seeing a shift from architecture to urbanism and larger built environment and its connection to the economy. Ultimately, however, it is the critic who has to encourage the public to look around and not be passive of their environment.

The Canadian context of the discourse is then placed in focus, including the role of the critic in presenting Canadian architecture to the world, and Canadian identity as a part of that. This results in the question of what is Canadian architecture, and a note that there are many lenses from which to answer the question of what Canadian architecture is. There is also reference to the development of a Canadian national architecture policy and how this could be a strategic document to put Canadian architects on the worlds stage, in addition to domestic policies. Canada’s northern geography and climate, and the relationship between its landscape and architecture, is noted as something that differentiates it from other northern countries. There is also the comment that in order to critique Canadian architecture, you have to be able to and afford to travel, including internationally if comparing it on the worlds stage.
Finally, and most importantly, it was expressed that Canada has not yet properly address climate change or truth and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. Whether architects and architecture critics are the ones to address these issues or if they can create change themselves is left unanswered by one of the panelists, however, in light of the others’ repeated notions of the positive social change the critic can help to inform, it can be assumed that the majority of the panelists would agree that critics should at least attempt to be a part of this change.

III. Synthesis and Analysis

This section will analyze and synthesize the above discourse in relation to the central arguments of the thesis, and its related questions about the role and influence of the popular architecture critic in architectural decision-making.

Beginning with the symposium finding that, while traditional popular architecture criticism, as published in print publications (most often newspapers), is in a state of demise, in contrast, popular criticism itself is flourishing in both academic and digital formats such as social media. It has also been noted that there has been a significant shift from formalist architecture criticism, to urban issues-based criticism of the built environment as a whole, and a shared sense that readership and public interest in design issues is increasing due to the more accessible nature and dissemination of online publications. The success of Spacing magazine and its online blog sites is seen as
The above conclusions, in addition to other findings from the discussion, however, lead to questions in relation to the central argument of the thesis. The first such question is, **who is the intended audience for today’s popular architecture criticism?** It is clearly expressed by multiple panelists that it is the general public, and not the profession or practitioner, who have interest in, and benefit from, such criticism. Gironnay states that the critic does not write for architects, and that it is not the role of the critic to inform architecture itself. Phillips also notes that architects often avoid criticism, and that it is the lay public who has interest in knowing what the critic thinks. Boddy also concedes that while architecture criticism is appreciated as an idea, few appreciate its practice. This includes not only architects and developers, but also editors and advertisers, giving some indication as to why there is a present decline in newspaper criticism. Bozikovic is more optimistic about the influence criticism can have, however, suggesting that it can form a base education for the public to become more informed, and hopefully as such, an active player in their own built environments, and Gironnay agrees that the focus should be on society.

However, there is a contradiction here as, as will be seen, there is also an expressed idea by various panel members that popular architecture has the ability, in certain circumstances, to affect change both in terms of buildings yet to be constructed, and in terms of larger societal issues related to the practice and products of architecture. This
suggestion of potential influence is first seen in Gironnay’s statement, following her above comment that society should be the targeted audience, that popular criticism needs to “denounce bad processes, bad choices,” and suggesting that action should therefore be encouraged. This leads to the second question, being what influence should or can the popular critic have on built projects, most specifically on architectural decision-makers?

Overall, the majority of the panelists agreed that to varying extents, criticism can have an effect outside of itself and its immediate readership of the public and resultant increased public knowledge. Boddy admits that he was originally skeptical as to the ability of criticism to affect architecture, before citing Ada Louise Huxtable as, “a very good writer” as well as a “fearless and very astute advocate.” He notes that she “made things happen in her city, and not happen,” indicating his changed position on the matter. Bozikovic also suggests that it has been the demise of newspaper criticism and rise of blog criticism that has ironically resulted in “considerable gains” for the profession, and its influence.

In relation to architectural decision-makers specifically, Chodikoff is the most certain of the abilities and power of criticism to effect change when intending to do so. He notes that if a piece of criticism can gain the attention and convince one individual of authority, such as a city councillor or someone such as Phyllis Lambert, the resultant action can be more effective than large public displays or reaction such as a street
protest. He notes how gaining the attention of a politician can in turn affect and influence a community project, especially when in relation to heritage issues, at that while critiques might be small-scale actions, they can be amplified by others and “add to the conversation in a constructive way.” In this way, the critic is not the sole arbiter of change, but rather a player or actor in the larger field, but one with an important voice that can lead to influence. Chodikoff goes to the extent of suggesting that popular architecture criticism, in its digital form, has a “powerful and positive future” ahead of it.

Examples given by the panelists of this potential influence include mention of the Victims of Communism Memorial that had been planned for Ottawa, and which was halted and drastically redesigned and relocated, due to the critical backlash it received. In this case, it was not only the critics who were writing in opposition to it, but also the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC), adding its voice and amplifying the others in the process. This was seen as opening up a new venue for critical commentary, and as leading to results. The highly rejected addition to the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa was also mentioned as a project that received a critical reaction that lead to a redesign of the project, from both professional critics and online memes alike, in addition to strong legal action from Heritage Ottawa.

Countering these arguments, however, Theodore suggests that there is little the critic can do in their role to create change, and that if it is change you intend for, you need to
actually do something physical. He suggests that commenting on the design of a building, after it has already been constructed, can do little to change it, and this in turn results in the questions as to when criticism is most effective, in relation to the stages of a project. He also suggests that he is unsure how a short-form newspaper article can address something as complex as a political system, and that rather, it should focus on the artefact itself, i.e. a building. Theodore, however, has a very narrow definition throughout at to what is popular architecture criticism, and the role it can play outside of singular, literary expressions, as will and has been seen.

More tangible, however, and in relation to the question of the critic’s lack of role or need for their work in creating change, Phillips notes the extensive growth in the quality of Edmonton’s urban planning, before revealing that this has all been driven by political will and interest, as there are no critics in the city currently that he is aware of, and adding that he believes that one of the most important aspects in leading to a successful built environment is the mayor themself. Thus, there is an overall sense that there are opportunities for criticism to have influence, whether directly or indirectly, along with suggestions that is must be targeted and informed, most likely towards those with political power.

This idea that the critic can with have influence, or work towards influencing someone of influence, results in the third question: what are the tactics that can be employed by the critic, if the critic intends for their criticism to result in change?
For Bozikovic, the opportunity for a critic to be “proactive and suggest solutions to a problem,” is something he sees potential in for certain circumstances of critical practice. He references *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman’s commissioning and publishing of plans for Penn Station, and suggest that this could also be considered an act of advocacy (and suggesting a broader interpretation of what can be considered popular criticism as will be reviewed below). Chodikoff suggests another tactic being the need for critics to embed themselves within the various stakeholders and constituents that affect the build environment, in order to achieve a critical impact whether, blindly or implicitly or otherwise.”

Thus the use of judgement and need for developing one’s critical argument is also noted. Gironnay suggests that it is not judgement, but rather the ability to describe, that is the most important quality in a critic, and Theodore expresses his discomfort with the idea that criticism is the opinion of the critic, as opposed to the informed analysis of the project. Lam, however, expresses that it is through written criticism that one can best organize and develop an argument, whether in support or opposition of something. Lam states, “It feels to me like writing is actually a special category of criticism that enables other kinds of criticism to happen [...] you need writing as a fundamental critical thinking skill.”
The tactic most widely referenced, however, is the need to understand and document the process of architecture, in order to be able to influence it, whether directly or indirectly. Here Chodikoff first recognizes the importance of investigating the entire process of architecture, as opposed to criticism’s often fixation with the building as a final and end result. Suggesting that, “process makes perfect,” he stresses that the process of both the design and construction of architecture need to be better understood and publicized, in order to give deeper critical understanding, and not only focus on the aesthetics of a project. As such, it is the process more so than the result that needs to be explored in order to have influence in either that project specifically or larger systemic changes. Polo also shares this thought and suggests that the popular critic needs to understand the “context, forces at play, [and] the influences that shaped these buildings,” in order to learn from the past.

Boddy details an example of this in practice from when he resided in Ottawa and was able to follow the development of Moshie Safdie’s National Gallery of Canada project in person and in real-time. This included interviewing Safdie and following the construction process, before writing an almost 5,000-word article about it for Canadian Architect at the time. He notes this level of project knowledge and word count as needed in order to share the larger context, as something that has not happened before or since, but that such a project deserved such a response. Lam too highlights the importance of primary sources and in-person experience with the project in order to write a fully informed criticism that both gives and makes use of a larger context. In this sense, Girronay notes
her interest in the Mirvish+Gehry panel, and that such projects are “crying out to be
treated by journalists, by investigating journalists, and we need that absolutely to look
at how the things get built, why those [are the ones that] get built instead of those, why
these decisions were made, and the phenomenons and processes are rather
complicated.” This comment then relates back to the role of criticism in influencing
architectural decision making, and suggests that that is only possible when the critic
understands all the factors that are at play, and how or where to influence them
accordingly.

But then what is in the role of the critic and through what forms or mediums can the
critic operate in? Boddy provides a clear summary of the three categories of criticism
that he subscribes to, being activist criticism, “which is towards an end to change things,
make a better world,” with critics such as Ada Louise Huxtable and Jane Jacobs, moralist
criticism, which seeks a higher spiritual approach to criticism and includes John Ruskin,
and the German tradition of formalist or theoretical criticism, which can be
“exceptionally rigourous and unbeholden to the distractions of time and place of its
creation” or “be pretentious, philosophizing, or pointless formal analysis.” However,
this categorization of types of criticism is followed by a discussion on what forms
popular architecture criticism can take. In this regard, there is a difference of opinion
among the panellists, for while the majority, including Boddy, Chodikoff, Gelbard, Lam,
Polo and Rochon, believe that critical practice can extend past written critique to
include other forms such as exhibitions, installations, lecturing, critical art, and
participation on juries and panels, among others. Lam too sees the possibilities for criticism to happen outside of written critique, but also sees it as being a larger conversation than individual articles or practices, and instead as a full discourse needing to be presented in a journalistic manner, in order to broaden the agenda of all critics involved.

Theodore, however, has the strict belief that popular criticism is that which is written on the page, and written well, stating that if you want to open up criticism to include these various other practices, it is “not helping us define what the role of criticism might be.” Theodore also suggests that the disappearance of newspaper critics has little to do with the other forms of criticism, and that while architecture critics are disappearing, other forms, which we can be open to, are not the same category of criticism as is being discussed. Theodore also questions what the critic is to do in cases where a building is considered to be good architecturally but has a negative effect on the city at an urban scale, or when a building can be appreciated aesthetically or formally but is not appreciated by its users, as has often been the case with brutalist buildings. This leads to questions about the case study, as this is a central argument made in defense of it confused critical response.

As noted above, there has been a general shift from architectural to urban criticism in recent years. This has results, as pointed out by Lam, in the proliferation of real estate or development-based blogs, such as Urban Toronto, which are documenting
architectural projects and their related issues from both a journalistic and investigative approach, and in “surprisingly great depth.” Lam notes that this includes reports of design review committee meetings and the views of specific committee member, and as shared above, Lam sees this as a potential entry point for popular architecture criticism to play an influential role with a larger and more informed and interested or open audience.

Philips also stresses the need to remember that architecture is a functional art, and thus requires a criticism that takes into account the effect it will have on the lives of its users and the urban fabric in which it is situated. Here he suggests that as such, critics must be able to critique not only the architecture from the perspective of form, as is often the case for with projects by architects such as Ghery, but also how it will effect urban life. Thus architecture critics have to balance between function and aesthetics, something not required of other cultural critics such as art of film critics.

Thus in conclusion, it at first can be surmised that that the popular critic fulfills a public, as opposed to professional role, and their work is therefore intended to affect people, rather than projects. However, with the deeper questioning that the symposium allowed for, it becomes evident that there is an operative element possible in popular architecture criticism today. This notion that popular criticism, especially in its more accessible current form through online publication and dissemination, can and should work to be influential is an important finding, for without it, popular architecture
criticism is without outcomes, results, or effect. The various tactics and tools noted, however, require further examination and research as to their methods, modes, and outcomes. For whether it is through passing judgement, expanding context, or changing mediums, how popular criticism can lead to positive change is most important in ensuring its continued vitality in its potential second ‘lease on life’, following its original demise. Thus, these findings will be overlaid onto both the previously discussed research of the current state of popular architecture criticism, and the theories of popular criticism, most notably Collins, Attoe, and Sorkin, to further develop the argument of the thesis. The question of whether a more democratized (digital) criticism has lessened the authority of the critic as an arbiter of taste, while reversely, increased the ability for their criticism itself to lead to influence (i.e. less singular authority but greater opportunities for influence) will also be explored.

Note: The writings of Globe and Mail architecture critic Alex Bozikovic are currently behind a paywall and thus not accessible to general public.
Chapter 3 – Project of Architecture

POP CAN CRIT

Current Condition in Popular Canadian Architecture Criticism

SPEAKERS & GUESTS

- Shawn Micallef
  Spacing, senior editor
- Alex Bozikovic
  Chief and chief architecture critic
- Christopher Hume
  Former Toronto Star urban affairs critic
- Lisa Rochon
  Architecture critic and writer
- Sophie Gironnay
  Montréal’s architecture in Quebec, curator and director
- Elsa Lam
  Canadian Architect, editor-in-chief
- Ian Chodikoff
  Architect and urban designer
- Ryan Phillips
  Analyzing and Canadian interiors, associate editor
- Trevor Boddy
  Architecture critic, critic and consultant
- David Theodore
  McGill University School of Architecture, assistant professor, architecture writer
- Marco Polo
  Ryerson University, Department of Architectural Science, associate professor
- Maria Cook
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REGISTRATION:
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Azrieli School of Architecture + Urbanism at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

Friday, October 21, 2016

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CHAPTER 4: Synthesis: The Value of Popular Architecture Criticism

What is lost with the demise of “popular architectural criticism”?

The (social) value and potentials of a criticism currently in crisis

The value of popular architectural criticism

In closing his essay on “The Nature of Architectural Criticism”, architect Hani Rashid asked seven telling questions on the current state of popular architectural criticism. Among them were, “What is the role of criticism in architecture today?” “How is it changing?” “What is the role of today’s populist journalist?” And whether the ‘blogosphere’ is “forging a pathway where criticism will assume a relevant, compelling [...] impact,” or if it is, “proving to be too unfiltered and uncontrollable to be a place from which real criticism emerges and in which it thrives?”¹ Within these questions lie the current anxieties and concerns for popular architectural criticism;² mainly that it is ineffective, lacking criticality, and at risk of losing its authority as a result of its democratization, in addition to the belief that the popular architecture critic could potentially already be “dead.”³

These notions prove to be relatively cursory, however, when we are asked the question of “What is lost with the demise of ‘popular architectural criticism’”? For when we think of what could be lost, rather than simply what is currently lacking (i.e. authority,

¹ Mohammad Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism: Global Perspectives. (Unknown: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2011).
³ Vanessa Quirk, “The Architect Critic is Dead: Just Not for the Reasons You Think.” (ArchDaily, April 2012)
criticality) the focus shifts from the shortcomings of criticism to the value(s) it has possessed historically as well as those which it currently holds (whether actual, perceived/projected, or idealized), in addition to its potential future worth and relevance. Thus the question becomes, “Of what value has / is / can popular architectural criticism be?” Or rather, “What is at stake?” It becomes a question of value; in much the same way criticism is meant to bestow value.

According to Suha Özkan, “Criticism is perhaps [one of] the only processes that validates the product of architecture.”⁴ But if criticism gives value to architecture, what validates criticism, especially within its more popular forms? As will be seen in this analysis, architectural criticism can be traced to the very (mythical) origins of architecture, and to the relationship between architecture and the advancement of society. Thus, if we are to prescribe to architect and critic Michael Sorkin’s view that, “The social is not the context of architecture but its substance,”⁵ the intrinsic links between architecture, criticism, and society starts to become apparent.

This view is also shared by architectural writer Peter Collins who believes that, “Moral appraisal, like a legal judgment, is a practical necessity” within architectural criticism.⁶ It is this social role of architecture that differentiates it, and its forms of criticism, from the other forms of art criticism, as architectural criticism is at its very core related to the social impact of architecture. This is due to the fact that if architecture is meant to

⁴ Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism: Global Perspectives, 6
⁵ Michael Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities (New York: Verso, 2011), 264
better society, and criticism is meant to better architecture in these aims, as we will see in the founding treatises on architecture, criticism’s ultimate goal is the improving of social conditions (be they related to social justice, the state of the environment, or pertaining to aesthetic concerns). Popular architectural criticism must therefore first be social in its nature. For it is this form of criticism that has the potential of being the most (socially) influential form of critique, being outside of the often inwardly focused scope of academia and its slower rate of production and distribution.

As previously noted, this is also due to the fact that the popular critic is the critical voice that is most in, and of, society, due to their position on the threshold between the practice of architecture and the general public. But it is important to note that the role of the popular critic should also be to act as the line between an academic understanding, and popular appreciation, of architecture. Sorkin states, “The duty of the critic, therefore, is [...] to empower his or her readers with an analytical tool with which to the make the environment more comprehensible and tractable – to make the public more critical.” This notion of a more critical public, however, has resulted in perhaps the most recent anxiety to face popular criticism, as the idea of the democratization of the discipline seemingly threatens a further loss of the critic’s authority and vitality. However, this can be seen as both the fear of a possible negative reality and impact on the profession, as well as the fear of a potentially lost opportunity for a transition that could in fact be of great benefit to the field of popular criticism. For as will be explored,

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7 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 267
it is the fear of a reduction in critical value judgments, as opposed to an opening up of the critical ‘airways’ to more democratic means of publishing, that is seen as the central crisis for criticism. This chapter will, thus, argue that democratization and critical value judgments can co-exist, and that this is both the greatest area of potential gain for a renewed form of popular architectural criticism, as well as an area of potential loss if it is to fall into an actual state of demise. This is also due in part to the fact that the history of architectural criticism is one of continuing steps towards popularization, as will be explored, and that it was a democratization of criticism in general that led to the formation of popular criticism.

Thus, the greatest loss that could manifest itself in the demise of popular architectural criticism would be to lose a critical voice of advocacy for the social and environmental within the discipline and within architecture as a whole. A secondary loss would be its roles in acting as the threshold between the public and the profession of architecture. As such, and in order to support these arguments, the chapter will first discuss the value of general (popular) criticism, followed by an understanding of the historical relationship between architecture, its criticisms, and social betterment. The chapter will then explore the current value of contemporary popular architectural criticism, concluding with a section on how the democratization of popular criticism could lead to a new social relevance and help avoid the demise of popular architectural criticism. This chapter will also make the case that architectural criticism has always meant to be both social and democratic.
Popular criticism

In his 1995 essay “Resisting the Dangerous Journey”, critic and curator Michael Brenson details both the perils and imperatives of writing as a journalistic (or popular) critic. In the piece Brenson states, “Yet largely because of its identification with the impersonal and mysteriously powerful news media institutions in which it appears, it is also the one field of criticism that seems essentially untouchable and unaccountable. Its enormous influence is taken for granted [...] and within the academic world only the most generous scholars treat it with respect.” This claim then leads to an explanation of the value of both studying and participating in journalistic criticism, as well as a caution against continuing to exclude it from cultural and academic discourses. Brenson continues:

“Journalistic critics can do much more than keep a respect for the vividness and concreteness of aesthetic experience alive. Because they are writing for publications that reach out to a general audience, they have an opportunity to build bridges not only across many regions within the art world but also between the art world and the world’s outside it.”

But what is the full value of popular criticism? For Brenson, it is the popular critic’s influence on the public’s perception of cultural products such as art or literature, with

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9 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 112
general publications often acting as the only media outlet which would reach them, as well as the critic’s ability to use language to make “their words quiver with the spark that makes a particular work of art live.”

These roles, of popularizing and animating, however, are but two small fractions of a larger understanding of the important functions and responsibilities of popular criticism, generally speaking. For architecture writer Wayne Attoe, “Criticism is broadly concerned with evaluating, interpreting and describing.” For Richard Martin it is a way to register values and identify the best thinking and ideas of the present age, while also acting as a historical record for the future. For others such as Maurice Berger, popular criticism is meant to look for “social, cultural, historical, or psychological meanings below the surface of the story,” as well as use “language and rhetoric not merely for descriptive or evaluative purposes but as a means of inspiration, provocation, emotional connection, and experimentation” – thus ultimately implying that criticism should also inspire the reader, rather than merely as a form of description, judgment, or advocacy.

**Popular opinion**

But this notion of an individual being in the position of arbiter, whether of taste, value, or meaning – and the related ideas of judgment and evaluation – lead lecturer and author Ronan McDonald to ask whether all value judgments are equal and all opinions

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10 Ibid, 110
12 Berger, *The Crisis of Criticism*, 59
13 Ibid, 8
14 Ibid, 11
15 Berger, *The Crisis of Criticism*, 14

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are worth the same, or rather, if the critic must therefore presume a hierarchical role within the context of criticism. In this sense, and throughout his text, McDonald advocates for the critic as judge, one who is an expert in their specific field, and one whose authority allows for the critic to give value and act as an authoritative guide for the public. This is then furthered by Colin McDowell who claims that, “In a world in which there is no blame, praise becomes meaningless. This is a dangerous situation for business or artistic endeavours: it strips away internal rigour and lays the way open for unchecked indulgence.”

But judgment is not necessarily judgment of worth. Not only evaluation but also mere description involves the exercise of judgment; and thus the word ‘criticism’ is, without impropriety, often used to designate simply the scientific investigation and description of the text, origins, character, structure, techniques, history or historical context, and so on, of a work of [art]. When the word ‘criticism’ is used in this sense, a critic is a person whose knowledge, training, and interests presumably equip the critic to study and describe a given work critically – that is, with discernment as to such matters as just mentioned.

At its very centre, however, whether criticism is judgmental or behavioural it can be agreed that criticism’s main purpose is often to (constructively) challenge or invoke

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16 Ronan McDonald, The Death of the Critic, (Bloomsbury Academic: Unknown, 2007), vii
17 McDonald, The Death of the Critic, 4
18 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 70
19 Attlee, Architectural and Critical Imagination, 4
change through critical intervention\textsuperscript{20} – whether that be to our own thinking, the work itself, or its rationale or theoretical grounding – and to “cultivate” rather than “inhibit”\textsuperscript{21}. And it is this concept of cultivating that is perhaps increasingly the most important concept within popular criticism, as commercial success is becoming a seeming replacement for critical praise, whether it be through the promoting of box-office numbers, ‘likes’ and ‘clicks’, or online poles which are acting as the “markers of cultural quality.”\textsuperscript{22} Yet while this is not meant to take away from the idea of the public’s ability to discern for themselves, “by diminishing the role of the informed critic in the evaluative process – in effect, making the end-user, the consumer, the most effective and persuasive arbiter of quality – market-driven culture leaves little room for minority points of view, edginess, difficulty, or controversy, whether in the cultural mainstream or sometimes even at its increasingly embattled margins.”\textsuperscript{23}

For Berger, this allows the critic to act as mentor to the public, to push against “the grain of popular tastes” and to introduce the public to lesser-known or more challenging works, “offering insights that might make a work more accessible, engaging, profound, or relevant.”\textsuperscript{24} Criticism can, as such be viewed as a multi-faceted discipline that seeks to provide the general public with new and nuanced ways of understanding culture and cultural products. But in light of the present study – and the question that drives it – we must ask, if popular criticism, as the larger subset to popular architectural criticism,

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{20} Berger, \textit{The Crisis of Criticism}, 146
  \item\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 59
  \item\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 6
  \item\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 7-8
  \item\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 8
\end{itemize}
Chapter 4 – The Value of Popular Criticism

were found to be no longer relevant, what would be lost? It is the hypothesis of this thesis that the value of popular criticism in general is to be found in its ability and primary goal to translate academic, theoretical, and esoteric concepts, beliefs, and ideologies into a language that is comprehensible by, and of interest and meaning to, the general public. Once this has been achieved, popular criticism can work to achieve its second aim to judge, challenge, and give or remove value from the work in discussion.

However, if previously critics have, “played a vital, even public, role in influencing the shape, texture, and direction of American culture, their value and relevance is growing increasingly tenuous in many sectors of mainstream American cultural life.”25 This sentiment is echoed by Brenson who believes that unless the critic continually asks themselves whether they are pushing the proverbial envelope, and reinventing their position, they should be concerned about what effect their vision, or lack there of, will have on the attitudes towards the critic, and popular criticism in general.26 The value, and related potential loss specifically for popular architectural criticism within the larger discourse of criticism is, therefore, its role as a threshold between the public and the cultural works which criticism acts upon, leading to an inherent relationship with, and impact on, society.

*The (social) value of architecture, its criticism, and its public*

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25 Berger, *The Crisis of Criticism*, 4
26 Ibid, 125
“I began to write this work for you since I noticed that you have built much and continue to do so now, and that for the foreseeable future you will ensure that both public and private buildings will so match the majesty of your achievements that they will be handed down in the memory of future generations.”

The (social) value of architecture

Shifting towards the study of architecture, within the context of popular criticism, it is important to first understand the historical grounding in which the value of architecture and its related criticisms is established within the beginnings of architectural theory. Thus through a study of the founding treatises of architecture, it becomes evident that the imperative and consensual value of architecture is the desire to better society, and that these documents are meant to act as the grounds on which to both build and judge architecture within this understanding.

According to Robert Tavernor, “Vitruvius has shaped the modern professional architect by aspiring the notion in the Italian Renaissance that the individual architect [...] should be regarded as a creative force for the betterment of society.” This is ascribed to Vitruvius’ belief that the fundamental qualities of architecture are firmitas, utilitas, and venustas, or durability, utility, and beauty, and that the betterment of architecture would lead to the betterment of society. This principle, and its social connotations,

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28 Ibid, xiv
29 Ibid, 19
would then be echoed, in various forms, in many of the treatises and manifestos that would document the changing nature of architectural theory.

For Leon Battista Alberti, architecture gives, “comfort and the greatest pleasures to mankind, to individual and community alike.”30 And in the words of Henry Wotton, “the end is to build well,” citing Vitruvius’ “Commoditie, Firmenes, and Delight”.31 This social bent is then continued in the utopian sentiments of one of the fathers of Modernism when Le Corbusier states, “Nevertheless there does exist this thing called ARCHITECTURE, an admirable thing, the liveliest of all. A product of happy people and a thing which in itself produces happy people.” Eight decades later, Michael Sorkin would add the need for the “construction of cities that are humane, democratic, and sustainable,”32 for as Marco Frascari explains, “The built environment in which we live sets an important backdrop to what we are and what we do, because we build architecture, but in return architecture builds us.”33 Thus if the treatises and manifestos of architecture are understood, architecture is, by its very nature, directly related to, and influential of, the overall wellbeing of society.

_The (social) value of architectural criticism_

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31 Henry Wotton, _The elements of architecture, collected by Henry Wotton Knight, from the best authors and examples_, (London: John Bill, 1624), 1
32 Sorkin, _All Over the Map_, 43
According to architectural historian and critic Joseph Rykwert, in his short essay “Criticism and Virtue,” if we prescribe to “our professional father” Vitruvius’ account of the origins of architecture, it is architectural criticism that can be considered to be among humankind’s first collective endeavours. For as fire first brought people together, and the beginnings of language were established, the need to constructor shelter led to the constructive acts of comparison and critique. According to Vitruvius:

“It was then that some of them from these first groups began making shelters [...] Next, by observing each other’s shelters and incorporating their innovations of others in their own thinking about them, they built better kinds of huts day by day. Since men were naturally imitative and quick to learn, they would show each other the results of their building, proud of their own inventions, and so, sharpening their wits in competition, became more competent technically everyday.”

For Rykwert, this implies that, within the context of this mythical origin of architecture, architectural criticism can be considered a primary activity of speech and building, acting as the hypothetical origin of criticism itself. This leads to Rykwert’s own belief that criticism must be based on both theory as a tool to discriminate and history “to form our theories in light of what we have learned from the past.” Thus it is in the

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34 Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism, 28-29
35 Vitruvius, On Architecture, 38
36 Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism, 28
37 Ibid, 29

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history of architectural criticism that one can find a part of its value as well as its origins of theory, “For all fields, and especially architecture, comprise two aspects: that which is signified and that which signifies it. That which is signified is the object under discussion, while that which signifies is an explanation of it conducted according to scientific principles.”38 And it is this need for explanation that allows for and requires the dual practices of architectural theory and criticism for:

“If anyone who has an average understanding of those aspects of the separate disciplines and their theoretical foundations essential for architecture has done more than enough to ensure that he would not be left floundering if he had to judge and evaluate one of these subjects or techniques.”39

Yet while Vitruvius’ treatise, from the first century BC, is to be considered the first theoretical text to theorize criticism, it is Alberti’s *The Art of Building in Ten Books* from the middle of the fifteenth century which can be seen to be “the first theoretical work in terms of a critical discourse,” as, “he did not produce solely a didactic book to guide practice, but added substantial depth to the discourse of architecture.”40 To this end, Rykwert explains that the fundamental difference between Vitruvius’ and Alberti’s treatises is that while the former wrote about previously existing buildings, the latter was prescribing how future buildings were to be constructed.41 It is within this context

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38 Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 5
39 Ibid, 12
40 Al-Asad, *Architectural Criticism and Journalism*, 6
41 Alberti, *On the art of building in ten books*, x
that Alberti expresses the following insights into critical judgment, and its relationship to the bettering of both architecture, and in turn society:

“Merits and defects are particularly obvious and striking in public buildings, though (for some reasons, I do not understand), criticism of impropriety is more readily given than approval of a work elegantly constructed and with no imperfections [...] It is remarkable how some natural instinct allows each of us, learned and ignorant alike, to sense immediately what is right or wrong in the exaction and design of a work [...] Consequently, if presented with anything in any way inadequate, unstable, redundant, useless, or imperfect, we are immediately struck by the desire to make it more agreeable.”42

This in turn echoes Sorkin’s assertion that everybody’s a critic.43

“When we see some other person’s building, we immediately look over and compare the individual dimensions, and to the best of our ability consider what might be taken away, added, or altered, to make it more elegant, and willingly we lend our advice. But if it has been well designed and properly executed, who would not look at it with great pleasure and joy?”44

42 Ibid, 33
43 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 263
44 Alberti, On the art of building in ten books, 4
As such, according to the founding treatises of architecture, the relationship between architecture and criticism is one of constructive improvement. Accordingly, if architectural criticism is meant to better architecture, and architecture is meant to better the living standards of its inhabitants, architectural criticism must be seen to be a social practice.

The (social) value of popular architectural criticism

Yet while Alberti was writing for an elite group within society, as indicated by his use of eloquent prose and Latin, it would be critic Henry Wotton’s publication of his treatise “The Elements of Architecture” in 1624 which would work to popularize architectural theory and criticism. In his introduction to the 2009 reproduction of the text, Benjamin Blankenbehler explains that Wotton came to understand the importance of architecture to the general public of his time, and thus worked to inform the layperson about the principles and theories of architecture within an English context. His text was therefore “a short book which could [theoretically] be found on any person’s dresser,” with its more popular nature being noted in the fact that, “It deals less with the spheres of the universe and more with the soil conditions prudent for the single-family home.”

Wotton thus gives this advice for the popular judgment of architecture:

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45 Ibid, x
46 Ibid, i
47 Wotton, The elements of architecture i
48 Ibid, iii
“I could wish him that commeth to examine any noble Work, first of all to examine himself, whether perchance the sight of many brave things before (which remain like impressed formes) have not made him apt to thinke nothing good, but that which is the best; for this humour were too sowre.”

In this sense, Wotton can be understood to have moved towards the democratization of architectural theory and criticism, to be discussed further, through his attempt to educate the public on how to be more critically minded towards architecture. This would later be championed by Ruskin as a moral and social critic and lead to the popular publishing of architectural criticism in newspapers and journals in Britain and abroad, most notably beginning with the weekly publication of *Building* in 1842. This eventual change in the public interest in architecture was thus made further evident by Gropius when he stated that, "The general public, formerly profoundly indifferent to everything to do with building, has been shaken out of its torpor: personal interest in architecture as something that concerns everyone of us in our daily lives has been widely aroused; and the broad lines of its future development are already clearly discernable."

However, this was not the first recorded statement of the edifying role of architectural theory and criticism for both the educated and the layperson alike, for as noted in Filarete’s treatise of approximately 1464, Filarete claims that the architecture of the Ancients is best as it pleases both the connoisseur and those who do not understand

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49 Wotton, *The elements of architecture*, 92
50 Al-Asad, *Architectural Criticism and Journalism*, 6
architecture. Then after the discovery and review of the ‘golden book’, Filarete’s patron, who had previously appreciated the architecture of the moderns, states, “The antique fashion is beautiful without a doubt, and let no one ever again argue to me for modern modes... for in the past I have had many buildings built and all in the modern [manner... But this book] opened my mind about architecture [...] because these [ancient] buildings please everyone.” This therefore suggests that what we appreciate about architecture can change as we become informed, however guided or misguided that information may be.

The historic relationship between architecture, and the education of the general public, is made even more relevant when contemporary socio-architectural critic Michael Sorkin echo’s the ideas of Vitruvius’s triad of *firmitas, utilitas,* and *venustas,* when he states, “Do forgive the piety of all of the foregoing. It’s motivated by my [...] deep desire to live and work in a world that’s decent, delightful, and beautiful. A world where everyone has the right to architecture.” As ultimately, if architecture is meant to better society, as noted in the treatises above, and arch criticism is meant to better architecture, and thus society, the (popular) architecture critic has to be a critic of society, as well as an educator of the public. What then, according to this historical understanding, would be lost in the demise of popular architectural criticism? The casualty of such a demise would be to an extent the social relationship between architecture as an agent to create positive change, and criticism’s role to better

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52 Antonio Averlino Filarete, *Filarete’s Treatise on Architecture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 110
53 Filarete, *Filarete’s Treatise on Architecture*, 222
54 Sorkin, *All Over the Map*, xvii
architecture; thus the over loss of a possible betterment of architecture, and therefore society, through the discipline of criticism.

The value of contemporary popular architectural criticism

This knowledge of the historical relationship between the founding theories of architectural theory and its critique, in addition to the ethical undertones that led to both its social purpose and societal popularization, now brings us to a need to study its value within its contemporary context and practice. For if we are to assess the possible loss that would result from the effective end of popular architectural criticism, it is its potential present day ability to activate and advocate for social change, that would be ‘lost with the demise’.

A social value

Acting as the most socially minded architectural critic – within academia, practice and the popular press alike – Sorkin carefully outlines the social role of popular architectural criticism in his 2007 essay “Everybody’s a Critic”. Writing in a style that is often pointed and satirical, Sorkin most often uses his role as a critical voice to explain and bring out the underlying ethical, political, social and environmental factors at play in an urban or architectural project.

Sorkin sees the role of criticism being directly engaged with the environment of both people and the planet, with architecture often being responsible for either “creating or
curing” many of the ethical dilemmas of our time.\textsuperscript{55} As such, it is the duty of the critic to work towards both a legal and conceptual framework that would bring about a generally accepted and uncontroversial requirement for sustainable practice, whether environmentally, socially, or economically speaking, according to Sorkin.\textsuperscript{56} This is then balanced by the recognition that the task of the architecture critic has often been understood solely within aesthetic terms, as a critic of quality, beauty, and artistic merit.\textsuperscript{57} However, Sorkin frames this notion within a social framework stating, “A critic cannot simply assert the timelessness of any given traditional architecture, but must connect it to its role in culture, its ability to fulfill a building’s obligation to the environment, its importance as an element of humanity’s mosaic of achievement, [and] its ability to conduce the happiness of its inhabitants.”\textsuperscript{58}

Sorkin, however, is not the only writer in this study to reflect on the need to judge architecture by more than its aesthetic qualities. Collins makes the case for the need for rational, and thus rounded and well-informed, judgments in architecture. He claims that as the idea of reason is not objective enough to base judgments on – as we often rationalize more than we actually reason – reason itself must be contextualized within the categories of the environment, politics, procedural and design processes, and historical context.\textsuperscript{59} Yet ultimately for Collins, it is the responsibility of the architect, more than that of the critic, to ensure that a project is ethically rational and to weigh

\textsuperscript{55} Sorkin, All Over the Map, 267
\textsuperscript{56} Sorkin, All Over the Map, 267
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 266
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 271
\textsuperscript{59} Collins, Architectural Judgement, 48
and assess the obligation of architecture to society, with a clear emphasis being made by the author that there is always a distinction between minimum and optimum social obligation.60

The significance of the critic, and his or her criticism however, is not to be overlooked, as according to critic Roger Connah, “The usual circumstances involve the critic, the world and the text. The critic enquires a critical enquiry suiting the strategies. The written project becomes a tactical way of expressing larger strategies, [and] greater agendas.”61 However, in order to firmly define the social role of popular architectural criticism, one must return to Sorkin who claims, “It may be that the duty of architectural critics nowadays is less to rise in defense of ‘architecture’ than to defend the planet from too much [or too poor of a social quality] of it.”62

A critical value

This idea that criticism can be socially, or even critically, effective at all has recently been challenged by the theory of the ‘post-critical’. Within this theory, it is claimed by theorists such as K. Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman that architecture, in a possible post-‘post-modern’ state, has exhausted itself of theories and ideologies, and thus lost any form of criticality.63 As a result, criticism can no longer be of any critical or meaningful value, as the architecture that it is acting upon is no long critical itself.

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60 Ibid, 165-166
61 Roger Connah, Pulp Architecture, (Unknown: Vertigo, 2009), 45
62 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 266
Hilde Heynen clarifies this claim, however, by making a clear distinction between a North American and European understanding of critical architecture. The point is made that while critical architecture can be seen to be understood as needing to be radically transformative of the cultural and architectural landscape within an American perspective, within the context of European academia, the critical component of architecture is not seen to be solely intellectual, but rather, also socially, environmentally, and economically concerned. Thus the current condition of the criticality of architecture can be seen as a shift towards the societal, instead of post-critical. This interpretation can therefore help to revive the value of the popular architecture critic with a belief that architecture can still in fact be critical. Likewise, and largely in relation to its social potential, popular architectural criticism can then defend itself and purport its value to the larger field of critical discourse. Thus, Heynen concludes, “The driving force behind this position is the indignation concerning the fact that social reality continues to be oppressive and unjust, and the conviction that, as long as the situation remains persistent, the need for critique remains as urgent as ever.”

A public value

But of what significance to popular architectural criticism specifically is it that criticism is still able to be socially critical? It is therefore the placement of criticism as a point of

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64 Rendell, Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism, 51
65 Rendell, Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism, 53
connection between the public and the practice and study of architecture that is fundamental to its individual value. As a result, popular criticism is able to have a more direct and immediate possible reaction and impact on architecture, as well as a “pedagogical function” within the public’s understanding of it.\textsuperscript{66} This is due in part to the nature of popular publishing (whether print or digital), as opposed to academic writing, as it can be published at the speed of information and events and in real-time correlation to the progress of a project. This has led to reports that popular criticism is often stylized journalism or lacking in a grounded understanding of the work or theory (which is justifiably often apparent), however, when required, it is able to use the powers of immediacy to its critical advantage, and society’s benefit.

It can also, therefore, be implied that most often it is academic criticism that affects theory, which in turn influences practice, while popular criticism first affects practice, which then has the potential of reaching the level of theory. This is seen in the instance that a majority of movements in architecture commenced with a manifesto printed in a journal, and the belief that, “Critical discourse cannot be fresh and vivid unless it is communicated through magazines.”\textsuperscript{67} Popular criticism also has the ability to popularize architecture globally (whether this is of benefit to architecture is another matter), but the greatest challenge and value for popular architectural publications is, “to make the voice of architecture heard, and to make a difference, rather than being negated to the

\textsuperscript{66} Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism, 24

\textsuperscript{67} Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism, 6
margins of cultural discourse.”68 Thus architect Mohammad Al-Asad states, “The opportunities for making criticism relevant to architects and to the public at large are abundant. The challenge lies in finding ways of identifying and grasping these opportunities.”69

Thus the value of popular architectural criticism as a general practice (acting as a communicative threshold between the public and the profession), historically (to better architecture, which is to better society), and currently (to critically evaluate architecture based largely on social concerns) has now been established. With these values in mind, we can then express that the loss that would result from the demise of this practice, within its contemporary context, would be its missed potential to encourage systemic change within architecture, and to bring about social awareness to the public regarding the ethical, aesthetic, and intellectual concerns of the built environment.

**Reclaiming and renewing the value of popular architectural criticism**

In light of the above analysis of the potentials for loss – if popular architectural criticism was to enter a state of demise – we have seen the probable negative outcomes in terms the value of both its rich heritage and contemporary conditions. However, what is of greatest concern in regards to this currently theoretical situation is that such a demise would also result in the misplaced opportunity for popular criticism to experience the full effects of its present shift towards democratization. Currently, the democratization

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68 Ibid, 12
69 Ibid, 13
of criticism is being equated with a loss or reduction in criticality, however, this chapter will now attempt to show that democratization can in fact increase the overall critical value of the discipline. But what does this imply about our understandings of democracy and critical authority?

*The democratization of popular criticism*

The democratization of popular architectural criticism has recently become a topic of pointed discussion within the mainstream architectural media, 70 with academic publications also beginning to look at the phenomenon within criticism as a whole. Most influential in the debates, however, has been the shift towards new media, in particular internet-based entities such as blogs and social media platforms, and away from traditional print sources. 71 The related concerns have most greatly been in regards to a potential lessening of the rigour, accountability and editorial control of such critique, as well as a resultant decrease in the perceived authority of the professional critic. However, the notion of a democratized critical field has also been recognized for its lack of restrictive censorship and ability to more greatly share ideas. 72

This idea of a criticism of the people, by the people, and for the people and its social ramifications, therefore requires greater examination. This is due to the fact that if popular architectural criticism is currently nearing a possible demise, it is a critical indication that a new order of operative practice is required in order for it to remain

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72 McDonald, *The Death of the Critic*, 5
relevant and of value. And while it may be argued that democratizing practices will happen on their own, whether criticism accepts them or not, it is the responsibility of existing popular critics to facilitate and further this growing understanding and involvement of the general public. In this sense, the critic can help to bring about a democratized criticism that is as critical and of equal, if not greater, value than that of its hierarchical-authoritarian form.

Democratization and popularization

As we have seen, a critical study of the treatises of architecture show a progression towards the popularization and social relevance of architectural criticism. According to Berger, the continually dissolving boundary between high and low cultural constructions within a post-modern, and the increase of niche markets and ethnic and geographic diversity, in addition to the identification of emerging community based cultures, “have lessened and even delegitimized the need for dominate, centralized voices.”73 This leads to the question of whether the democratization of criticism could, in fact, increase its own criticality, authority, and effect, acting as the threshold between a critical public and educated experts.

According to Omar Akbar, “A political public that has an ‘institutionalized capacity to criticize’ is one of the core elements of the democratic idea,” however, “it would be easy to say that even the greatest democracies experience difficulties in bringing forth a

73 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 6
‘critical public.’”\textsuperscript{74} For Berger, the relationship between democratization and criticality means that while anyone with access to a webpage can now act as a “lay” critic, this does not mean that their judgment is inherently wrong or, reversely, that the professional critic is always “insightful”.\textsuperscript{75} But where, outside of the education provided by the critic, does the general public gain their knowledge on which to be critical about architecture? According to Sorkin, “For architecture, everybody actually is [a critic]. We are always in and around architecture and cannot escape its influence [...] You don’t need to be an architect to hit your head against the wall. Nor, one might add, to be a critic in order to shout ‘ouch!’”\textsuperscript{76} For these reasons, Sorkin states that, while most decisions pertaining to architecture and urban planning are made by those in a position of power or expertise, “reacting belongs to the people.”\textsuperscript{77}

However, there is a contingent of academics that offer strong counter-points to the idea of the democratization of the press. Most prominently within the texts used for this study, McDonald is a proponent for the authoritarian quality of the critic within a de-democratized field of critique, implying that the “masses” solely base their own critical judgments on superficial venues of review, such as Amazon ratings, book club recommendations, and blog references.\textsuperscript{78} As such, “The era of experts, the informed cognoscenti whose judgments and tastes operated as a lodestar for the public, has seemingly been swept aside by a public that has laid claim to its capacity to evaluate its

\textsuperscript{74} Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism 37
\textsuperscript{75} Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 4
\textsuperscript{76} Sorkin, All Over the Map, 263-264
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 32
\textsuperscript{78} McDonald, The Death of the Critic, 2
own cultural consumption.”

If we examine the underlying currents of McDonalds account, however, it becomes apparent that the concern is less about an opening up of the vehicles for opinion than it is a close in on the critic’s authority.

Questions of authority

Within a democratized popular criticism, it can be seen that there is still a significant and specific role for the professional critic to play. This leads us to the question of authority, and whether, within the context of a democratized criticism, the critic is still of critical relevance. If we are to subscribe to Sorkin’s view that “everybody’s a critic” yet that there are still important qualifications for the professional critic, or Collins belief that the best critic is the specialist, yet the architect is ultimately the expert, an idea can be composed implying a shift in terminology and meaning from ‘authority’ to ‘expert’.

Thus, if it is in fact the case that, “The public critic, who has the authority to shape public taste […is] no longer a figure for which a late capitalist society has much use,” in addition to the above study of the social context of popular architectural criticism, the case for the expert critic can also become a case for the critic as a social advocate, as opposed to an arbiter of taste.

Additionally, as an expert as opposed to an arbiter, the critic is left with the ability and responsibility to focus on what Attoe terms ‘contextual criticism’, where, “In order to

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79 Ibid, 4
80 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 147-150
81 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 169
82 McDonald, The Death of the Critic, 2
provide a thorough understanding of a building, another kind of descriptive information is needed, namely information about the social, political and economic context in which a building was designed. [Asking:] What were the pressures on the designers and the client? What opportunities were capitalized on? What obstacles were circumvented?"⁸³

This concept is supported by Collins who believes that it is the processes and procedures that bring about architecture which are most important when assessing a building, and that the serious study of such material is greatly lacking within the profession, and which could result in a meaningful new role for the critic as expert.

This is not to deny the idea that the trained architect or educated critic is not more apt to the sensitivities and “essential elegance of a well-constructed and properly functioning building,"⁸⁴ but rather that within the context of a democratized criticism, the architect, critic, and public all gain the right and access to an expression of opinion – the merits of which can then be judged. Thus the difference between expert knowledge and the authoritative position is best summarized when Attoe states, “Magazine and newspaper critics and historians are examples of experts whose influence derives from a broad overview of a situation, from information, imagination, and experience. The expert must be convincing while the authority figure’s power lies in his position.”⁸⁵

Ultimately, there is a public trust in, and need for, the professional critic. As such, the professional critic, as an expert and an educator, needs to have the right theoretical

⁸³ Attoe, Architectural and Critical Imagination, 103-104
⁸⁴ Collins, Architectural Judgement, 191
⁸⁵ Attoe, Architectural and Critical Imagination, 129
grounding and education, in addition to a multitude of other skills, in order to be of benefit to both architecture and the public.

**Criticism as behaviour**

Related to the notion that criticism can be based off of an understanding of expertise, as opposed to (potentially misplaced) authority, is Attoe’s democratic belief that, as any response to the built environment is an act of criticism, leading to his conclusion that criticism should be seen as a “on-going collection of diverse behaviours” more than as an act judgment. As such, Attoe sees no walls between critical, artistic, and scientific activity, but rather that all can be considered to be a “purposeful response.”

Therefore, whether it be photography, editorial cartoons, creative writing, film, graffiti, vandalism, the knocking down of a wall, participation in a protest, enacting of a new by-law, natural disaster, or war, there is an implicit critical commentary to be decoded by the critic. Attoe explains, “This criticism is best characterized as behaviour, human activity rather than a literary mode. It should be seen like other behaviours in relation to underlying motives, fears, intentions, and habits.”

This then brings about the concept of the ‘lay critic’ as being one who is not trained in the profession or study of architecture. Attoe cites Charles Lozar (1974) who identifies four types of behaviour common to the layperson in response to architecture and urban

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86 Ibid, xii  
87 Ibid, xii, 2  
88 Ibid, xix  
89 Attoe, *Architectural and Critical Imagination*, 8  
90 Ibid, 154-155
environments. These include: attitudes towards the environment, adoptive behaviour within the environment, unintentional modification of the environment, and intentional modification of the environment.\(^{91}\) It is important to note, however, that while these are all still forms of existing criticism (if any response is to be considered an act of criticism), they most often require an expert to interpret what they mean as criticism. Additionally, with the advent of the internet, lay criticism now also often includes the online publishing of blogs, op-eds, editorials, and comments, along with clicks and likes, and online voting.

But what of the social value of the lay critic? While Attoe laments that, “This taxonomy of lay criticism is limited by the fact that the examples all occurred after the fact,”\(^{92}\) it is the public’s response to proposed architectural projects in their planning stage, that has, in fact, been the most effective way of bringing about change to the built environment.

Michael Brenson concludes, “So criticism is for me not a position but a way of being. It is a way of encountering and being encountered, a way of testing and being tested, a way of feeling blind and beginning to see [...] So the measure of critics can ultimately be taken by their ability to struggle with issues and ideas that at one time they had no idea how to deal with.”\(^{93}\)

\(^{91}\) Ibid, 155  
\(^{92}\) Ibid, 161  
\(^{93}\) Berger, *The Crisis of Criticism*, 128
A critical public

But of what critical effect can the public be to architecture? How can the masses affect such a physical mass as architecture? As can be seen through two case studies, the Dubai International towers originally slated for construction in Istanbul and the currently proposed Mirvish+Gehry towers in Toronto, it is the public response to a project that can have the greatest affect on it during the planning stages. This is due to the fact that when the public shifts from the position of bystander to having an active critical role related to architecture, the social acceptance or rejection can result in changes to, or the complete cancelation, of a project.

This was true for the Dubai towers, which, due in part to the proliferation of editorial cartoons, were never built, and Mirvish+Gehry, where public and governmental concerns have reduced the scale of the mixed-use development from three towers to two, in addition to other alterations. Additionally, Sorkin makes the remark that during the proposal stages of the rebuilding of Ground Zero, he experienced an unprecedented public response, and that it was this that led to Libeskind’s master plan being amended. Ultimately, it is forward-looking criticism, that which looks at how to better future designs, that is the most impactful form of criticism.

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94 Al-Asad, *Architectural Criticism and Journalism* 59
95 Sorkin, *All Over the Map*, 28, 76
96 Attoe, *Architectural and Critical Imagination*, 144
This chapter, therefore, makes the case for the educating of the public by the expert critic to in turn helps bring about a critical public who can responsibly advocate for their own social beliefs and needs. And, if this is possible, the concerns over the democratization of criticism in turn can be reduced. Thus if the democratization of popular architectural criticism can be understood to be the only viable future for the profession, what future opportunity would be lost should popular criticism not react in time to prevent its demise? If popular architectural criticism is to collapse before responding to its current crisis state, we may lose the opportunity to create a more critical public through democratized channels with the belief that it is the mass public response, more so than the individual critical voice, that can create concrete and lasting social change within the built environment.

*The reconstruction of a social, popular architectural criticism*

“What I would like to suggest, though, is that criticism is flourishing everywhere, and that our task is not to deny this but to identify, channel, and amplify its manifold messages.”

Through this chapter, the value of popular architectural criticism has been explored in connection to its historical, contemporary, and possible future relationships to the social impact of architecture. The social relevance of criticism has also be analyzed in regards

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97 Sorkin, *All Over the Map*, 264
to its relationship with the general public, profession of architecture, and built environment. This has led to an acknowledgment that in order for popular architectural criticism to remain socially relevant, it must be allowed to become more fully democratized as, “Criticism is itself an art form, and like all art forms it must evolve, or atrophy and die. There can be, despite the conservative battle cry of “standards,” no criticism for all time, nor even for much time.”

Thus we can argue that the greatest potential loss in the event of the complete demise of popular architectural criticism would not be pertaining to its current state, which may already have lost the majority of its relevance, but its future potential if allowed to be more democratically open to public participation. In this we must also remember that popular criticism has always been intended to be a democratic practice, for it is the role of this form of criticism that most often brings what has traditionally been perceived to be ‘high’ art forms (architecture being one of them), to the populace of mass society, most often through ‘low brow’ mediums.

The thesis thus also asks the questions of whether popular architectural criticism can be simultaneously both democratic and critical through a change in the way we view or practice authority, for this is where a double anxiety lies. The conclusion of this chapter, and the larger thesis it works to synthesize, is that through the democratization of critical practice, popular architectural criticism will in fact become a more critical and

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98 Berger, The Crisis of Criticism, 40
vital pursuit. For as Wayne Attoe most eloquently states, “The ends of criticism should be beginnings. If criticism does not have a forward-looking bias it will be of little use and in fact of only passing interest.”99 These are the social values and opportunities that would be lost with the demise of popular architectural criticism.

99 Attoe, Architectural and Critical Imagination, 165
CHAPTER 5: Conclusion: Future Conditions of a Critical Practice

In Conclusion

Through this research, a more scholarly understanding of the academic, professional, and public significance of popular architecture criticism, and a re-imagining of the role of the popular critic, within a contemporary context, has been explored.

This has been achieved through the defining of its practice, an analysis of its current state, a review of its theoretical groundings, the analysis of a contemporary and critical discussion, and an overlaying of these findings to establish the value and future potential of a democratized popular architecture criticism.

We began with an understanding of the current conditions of popular architecture criticism, and delineated and differentiated popular architecture criticism from other forms of arts criticism. Here we cited Huxtable, who would not only define the founding of the practice of popular criticism, but also be the one to first note how architecture criticism differs from other forms of arts criticism.

Here we saw that since architecture is the most complicated of the arts, the critiquing of architecture should also be viewed as more complex, including the need to understand the public impact of a building. This public component of popular architecture criticism, and the fact that it acts as a record of our values, was contrasted by the fact that for
much of the untrained population, architecture is unseen and poorly understood. Therefore, it was concluded that the critic’s duty is to both bring attention to, and explain the complexities of architecture.

This brought us to an analysis of this form popular criticism specifically, and the claims that it is, or has been, in a state of crisis. The most significantly cited reason, however, is the phenomenon of the democratization of the critical media landscape, and idea that now ‘everybody’s a critic’ – a phrase coined by Sorkin.¹

And we saw that this perceived crisis, over the idea that anyone with access to the internet can critique a building, with little to no education or training, or that the public can now more readily take on the role of the lay critic, is at the heart of the concerns for the democratization of criticism.

The irony here, however, is noted by scholar Ronan McDonald, who makes that observation that it is therefore strangely ironic for us to be speaking of the critic as if dead, “when everybody now seems to be one [...and when] everyone has an opinion and one opinion is ‘as good as another.’”²

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¹ Sorkin, All Over the Map, 263-264
² MacDonald, Death of the Critic, 4
³ Sorkin, All Over the Map, 32
⁴ Collins, Architectural Judgement, 78
⁵ Collins, Architectural Judgement, 147
On the other hand for Sorkin, while most decisions pertaining to architecture are made by those in a position of power or expertise, “reacting belongs to the people.”³ Thus the democratization of criticism, and architecture criticism in particular, can lead to greater accessibility to understanding, a larger readership, and thus opportunity to create a more informed and engaged public, and ultimately more critical minds and voices to push for influence or change.

Next, in order to understand the academic grounding on which this study of popular architecture criticism is founded on we turned to a summary and analysis of the established theories of popular criticism.

Here we saw that for Collins, the judgement of architecture is seen as a means to help ensure the best possible outcome, and that while architectural judgements are by their nature more subjective than those pertaining to the law, there can be objective critiques of architecture when dealing with measurable concerns such as building health and safety and code considerations.

Collins also stresses the need for a criticism that goes beyond aesthetic concerns to include larger processes and context that play into an architectural project at stages of the design decision-making process, as opposed to focusing on the final product or

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³ Sorkin, All Over the Map, 32
building, in keeping with Huxtable’s previously discussed views on the duty and value of architecture criticism.

We also explored Collins’ disdain for this form of architectural judgement, when he states that, “Whether enunciated by architects, art historians or laymen, it can have no possible effect on the building under review. It may educate the public. It may publicize the architect, ulcerate the client or help overthrow the municipal government. But its immediate influence on the environment is nil.”

Lastly, we saw how Collins understands both the concept of ideals, as well as the differences between professional and public, or lay, criticism. While these are not the specific areas of focus for this research, Collins overlays them to make one more scorching attack on popular criticism.

He states, “Whatever the cause, and however altruistic the motives of those who thus take it upon themselves to fight the good fight against urban blight, its seems doubtful whether acrimonious exchanges in the public press help architects to fulfill their responsibilities to the general public.” He then softens his approach, however, reiterating: “This is not to deprecate. On the contrary, it has already been emphasized more than once that serious criticism, based on questions of principle, is the indispensable condition of professional progress.”

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4 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 78
5 Collins, Architectural Judgement, 147
6 Ibid, 206
Next we focused on the theories of Attoe, who continues to explore the grounds on which architecture can and should be judged, while taking a different approach to theorizing architecture criticism. Attoe focuses on the methods and tools of criticism, and suggests that criticism should be seen as *behaviour* rather than *final judgement*\(^7\).

Here Attoe focuses the gaze of criticism towards the future in a forward-looking manner. He states, “To capitalize on this unique feature of environmental criticism, the critic should emphasize what is in the future and should not be satisfied with categorical judgements about the past. Content of the critique should focus on how events in the present can teach us better how to handle the future.”\(^8\)

Attoe’s approach to criticism, however, is much more far reaching than Collins’ as he considers any interaction or response to the built environment or architecture to be a form of criticism as behaviour. As such, for Attoe, “criticism is something all of us are engaged in much of the time. Rather than a narrow, exclusive activity [...] criticism is an on-going collection of diverse behaviour.”\(^9\) In this sense, criticism is opened up from the exclusive domain of the judgemental, authoritarian critic, to the inclusive field of the engaged public.

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\(^7\) Wayne Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism” *JAE* (April 1976), 21  
\(^8\) Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism”, 21  
\(^9\) Ibid, xii
Thus we can conclude that Attoe’s conception of architectural criticism opens up Collins’ understanding of architectural judgement to be more popular and inclusive. Attoe reiterates this: “Unless architecture criticism develops a more purposeful bent, it will remain a peripheral and, for the most part, ineffective endeavour.”10 And that it is this sense of the social and environmental potential of popular architecture criticism that lay the ground work for the theories of Michael Sorkin.

We then concluded this chapter on the established theories of popular architecture criticism by looking at the theories of Sorkin, who brings great insight into the need for popular criticism, and its critics, to become more democrative and influential. We also looked at Sorkin’s understanding of architecture as a “service profession”, and the positive impact it can and should have on architecture and our world.11 Sorkin also notes that, “The social is not the context of architecture but its substance.”12

This understanding of the social potential of architecture criticism lead to a need to discuss Sorkin’s own view of the democratization of criticism. For Sorkin, however, this idea that “Everybody’s a Critic”13 is not novel or of concern. For Sorkin, “Democracy is not simply a matter of being heard but of having the power to sway the course of events.”14 Sorkin also notes that in addition to the general democratization of the

10 Attoe, “Methods of Criticism and Response to Criticism”, 165-166
11 Sorkin, “Critical Measure”, 35
12 Ibid, 264
13 Ibid, 263
14 Ibid, 69
media, within architecture everyone is already a critic, as we all live and work within the built environment and “cannot escape its influence.”

We also saw Sorkin’s additional position that architecture criticism can, and should, be as diverse as architecture itself, as the “interweaving of architecture with the social life that produces it [...] has produced the formal tradition of architectural commentary and critique, which dates back millennia, and assures us that it has always come from multiple perspectives and has been embodied in multiple discourses,” and that, “The task of criticism is surely not to ‘resolve’ this in a single approach but to enable more voices to be heard.”

Thus, the public’s increased critical voice should not be seen as a threat to the professional architecture critic, but rather as another opportunity for the critic to fulfill their duty of sharing the meanings of architecture with their audience, and thus one of the critic’s role becomes “to make the public more critical.” For as Sorkin indicates, architecture criticism is “a practice in which some form of advocacy must always be embedded.”

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15 Sorkin, All Over the Map: Writing on Buildings and Cities, 263
16 Ibid, 265
17 Ibid, 265
18 Ibid, 267
With this knowledge of the context and theories of popular architecture criticism, we moved to a summary and analysis of the 2016 POP//CAN//CRIT symposium to better understand the contemporary conditions from the leading Canadian critical voices.

Here we learned that, while traditional popular architecture criticism, as published in print publications, is in a state of demise, in contrast, popular criticism itself is flourishing in both academic and digital formats such as social media. It is noted that there has been a significant shift from formalist architecture criticism, to urban issues-based criticism of the built environment as a whole, and a shared sense that readership and public interest in design issues is increasing due to the more accessible nature and dissemination of online publications. Here it is also clearly expressed that it is the general public, and not the profession or practitioner, who have interest in, and benefit from, such criticism.

There is also an expressed idea that popular architecture has the ability, in certain circumstances, to affect change both in terms of buildings yet to be constructed, and in terms of larger societal issues related to the practice and products of architecture. With this, the majority of the panelists agreed that to varying extents, criticism can have an effect outside of its immediate readership of the public and resultant increased public knowledge. Boddy notes that Huxtable “made things happen in her city, and not happen,” and Bozikovic also suggests that it has been the demise of newspaper criticism
and rise of blog criticism that has ironically resulted in “considerable gains” for the profession, and its influence.

In relation to architectural decision-makers specifically, Chodikoff is the most certain of the abilities and power of criticism to effect change when intending to do so. He notes that if a piece of criticism can gain the attention and convince one individual of authority, the resultant action can be more effective than large public displays or reaction such as a street protest. In this way, the critic is not the sole arbiter of change, but rather an actor in the larger field, and one with an important voice that can lead to influence.

Thus, in concluding the findings from the symposium, it is evident that there is an active element possible in popular architecture criticism today. This notion that popular criticism, especially in its more accessible current form through online publication and dissemination, can and should work to be influential is an important finding, for without it, popular architecture criticism is without outcomes or effect.

The dissertation then concluded with a synthesis of the material to better understand the value of (a socially-mindred) popular architecture criticism. Through this we saw that there is still significant value and potential for meaningful influence and contribution from popular criticism, and that the democratization of this form of critical inquiry can
only resulted in increased and diversified critical voices, for the betterment of architecture, the larger built environment, and society at large.

This now shifts the concern from the death of the critic, to questions of who is or can be a critic, and advances the argument that the public needs to become more critical – that we must shift from a critical voice to a critical mass – and that the critic’s own role must also move to one of both education of the public and advocacy for the profession.

To summarize, while the supposed crisis in criticism is claimed to be largely a result of the democratization of criticism, through the democratization of the practice more voices can and will be heard, for the better. The critic’s job is therefore to help create a more critical and informed public, for we all experience and are affected by architecture. And a focus on process, context, and systemic issues, with a future-change approach will only continue to add to the value and influence of popular criticism.

For a more critical public will result in better architectural-decision makers across society, including those outside of architecture who have influence on our built environment
A Re-imagining: Moving forward

From the above findings, and in addition to professional experience, I am of the opinion that there is hope for a criticism that remains critical while also collective. For as architect Mohammad Al-Asad states, “The opportunities for making criticism relevant to architects and to the public at large are abundant. The challenge lies in finding ways of identifying and grasping these opportunities.”20 Huxtable also states, “Criticism is a constructive act that carries with it the obligation to inform and educate, making possible the kind of judgments through which the greatest understanding and pleasure are reached.”21

The significance of the matter for me is that the intention of criticism should be to create positive change, to challenge the status quo, to give new understanding or meaning, and to educate the public in order to create a more critical mass and responsive and responsible public.

For it is this inherent social role of architecture that differentiates it, and its forms of criticism, from the other forms of arts criticism, as architectural criticism is at its very core related to the social impact of architecture. This is due to the fact that if architecture is meant to better society, and criticism is meant to better architecture in this aim, the ultimate goal for criticism should be the improving of social conditions (be they related to social justice, the state of the environment, or pertaining to aesthetic

20 Al-Asad, Architectural Criticism and Journalism: Global Perspectives, 13
21 Huxtable, “Architecture Criticism”, 463-464
concerns). Popular architectural criticism must therefore first be social in its nature. For it is this form of criticism that has the potential of being the most (socially) influential form of critique.

This is also due to the fact that the popular critic is the critical voice that is most in, and of, society, due to their position on the threshold between the professional practice of architecture and the general public. But it is important to note that the role of the popular critic should also be to act as the line between an academic understanding and popular appreciation of architecture. As noted previously, Sorkin believes that, “The duty of the critic, therefore, is [...] to empower his or her readers with an analytical tool with which to make the environment more comprehensible and tractable – to make the public more critical.” This notion of a more critical public, however, has resulted in perhaps the most recent anxiety to face popular criticism, as the idea of the democratization of the discipline seemingly threatens a further loss of the critic’s authority and vitality.

This is not to deny the idea that the trained architect or educated critic is not more apt to the sensitivities and “essential elegance of a well-constructed and properly functioning building,” but rather that within the context of a democratized criticism, the architect, critic, and public all gain the right and access to an expression of opinion – the merits of which can then be judged. Thus the difference between expert

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22 Sorkin, All Over the Map, 267
knowledge and the authoritative position is best summarized when Attoe states, “Magazine and newspaper critics and historians are examples of experts whose influence derives from a broad overview of a situation, from information, imagination, and experience. The expert must be convincing while the authority figure’s power lies in his position.”

Or, if we are to use a metaphor akin to Collins’ legal comparisons, it comes down to a trial by jury versus a trial by judge.

But what of the social value is the lay critic? And of what critical effect can the public be to architecture? How can the public masses affect such a physical mass as architecture?

As stated in her article, “The Architecture Critic is Dead,” former ArchDaily editor Vanessa Quirk makes the claim that readers, “are less interested in architecture if it isn’t doing something to improve lives or radically transform the landscape or infrastructure of the city; if it doesn’t have a social mission.” And in a time where climate change and social justice are perhaps the most pressing issues of our time, it is fitting that architecture criticism would aim to, as the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s new mission states, “create a better world for all.”

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25 Portions of this section were developed for "Architecture Criticism vs. The Public: ‘Mirvish+Gehry Toronto’ A Case Study", presented by the author at the First International Workshop of the Research Project Mapping Crit.Arch: Architectural Criticism XXth and XX1st Centuries: A Cartography, on January 16, 2016
26 Quirk, “The Architect Critic is Dead: Just Not for the Reasons You Think”
27 Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Mission, Vision, and Values (2022 Strategic Plan) [https://raic.org/raic/about-raic](https://raic.org/raic/about-raic)
It is therefore my opinion, in answer to the thesis question of what is the role of the popular architecture critic within the context of a democratized media landscape, that the critic must first and foremost be an educator and enabler of the public, and an advocate for the profession’s ability to create positive change. In turn, this will require them to be a champion and an ally social justice and for the health of our planet.

But this leads to questions such as: Is criticism powerless? Why are more people not engaged in discussions around architecture? What are the current limits of democratization or the media within the democratization of criticism? And when does it become a myth?

It is my opinion that while the popular critic may lack influence the public does not. This can be seen in the comparison of two renovation-addition projects to buildings of national significance in Ottawa, that received different critical responses, and resulted in different outcomes. For while the cries of Canada’s top architectural critics and academics had little to no influence on the reduction of the brutalist qualities of the National Arts Centre (NAC) renovation and addition, the public outcry over the proposed addition to the Chateau Laurie resulted in multiple iterations being proposed, additional approvals being required by city, and a lawsuit brought by Heritage Ottawa. This project has yet to be realized, while the NAC project will celebrate its fifth anniversary this year. Thus, it can be clearly seen that a critical mass can have greater power than singular critical voice, even if one of authority.
It is also my belief that there is often little public interest and understanding of architecture due to the profession’s self-imposed opaqueness. Whether related to architectural jargon, or the perceived idea of who/what is an architect/architecture, the critic can play an important role in demystifying architecture and promoting the value, as opposed to the ego, of the architect. A comparison here can be made to urban-issue critics, such as Jane Jacobs (a contemporary of Huxtable’s), and the grassroots nature of their work and resultant tangible influence. In this way, architecture itself needs to be further democratized and popularized.

But it is also important to still question whether the current, suggested democratized media landscape is actually fully democratic, for while we consider the critic for The Globe and Mail to be a popular critic, The Globe is neither popular, nor free, with the content related to architecture criticism usually behind a pay wall.

But to close where we began, we must return to the idea of a crisis in criticism. It is my opinion that if there is a crisis, it is an existential or identity crisis of the critic themselves, or of the ego of the critic and is of little to no concern or consequence to the public or profession. What matters is the social role of architecture and its criticism.
As such, we need more diverse and marginalized voices to be given space, and for these voices to not only be heard but also have influence. And it is the popular critic who can help amplify these voices. Building a critical mass of critically minded and informed individuals outside the profession, is also as, if not more important for the overall success of the built environment, then staying within the silos of architecture. For the majority of decision made about our cities are made not by architect, but by those in places of decision-making outside of it. This is not to undermine the work, role, or importance of the architect, but rather to suggest that a critical public could have the potential to embrace the significant value of the architect more fully. And this is where I believe the synergy between the critical voice and the critical mass can take hold.

Ultimately, there is hope for popular architecture criticism if it can move past its own concerns and shift its focus to those that will ultimately impact society and our planet, for the better, as a whole. A critical mass could make a critical difference.
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