

## Swagger From the Front: Crisis and Criticism since 1980

For Herbert Muschamp, criticism was always driven by crisis. In a 1997 interview with Anycorp editor Cynthia Davidson, the late New York Times architecture critic explained, “Being a critic means to call things into crisis, and there's always a new crisis.”<sup>1</sup> Twenty years later, the world at large evinces no shortage of crises. Political turmoil, environmental destruction, and social justice and civil rights battles abound, and each news cycle seems to rewrite history towards a menacing future. Architecture’s disciplinary bounds are facing identity crises, too; an architecture of social justice has yet to be determined, and architects face ethical dilemmas regarding what to build in the midst of increasingly troubling political regimes. For criticism driven by crisis, the stage is handily set. Architecture must engage these crises—and thus, criticism—to confront global calamity, and to legitimize its *raison d’être* in this age of constant turmoil.

Historically, architectural criticism has confronted crises of broader context. Works and collections like Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and Charles Jencks’s *Modern Movements in Architecture* serve not only to historicize architecture through criticism, but also to synthesize a litany of disciplinary issues into consolidated records. Though they might act as historical artifacts today, at the time, they were plans for future battles. It is crucial for architects and critics alike to study those battle plans to look toward what criticism may do for architecture in and for the future of the world.

Muschamp’s linkage of crisis and criticism likely originates from Manfredo Tafuri, the architectural historian who wrote from the 1960s to the 1980s of a *progetto di crisi* (translated from Italian to “project of crisis”). For decades, Tafuri, a staunch Marxist, wrote about architecture’s relationship with capitalism. But in the late 1970s, Tafuri ignited architectural criticism’s own disciplinary crisis.<sup>2</sup> Tafuri proclaimed that the project of modern architecture had fallen victim to capitalist agendas, and retreated from writing about contemporary architecture. Though Tafuri’s work after 1980 contributed significantly to scholarship on historic renaissance architecture, his refusal to continue to engage contemporary architecture permanently scarred the discipline of architectural criticism—if the prolific critic Manfredo Tafuri no longer believed in contemporary criticism’s vitality, who would? In a 2004 issue of *Log*, contemporary critic Sylvia Lavin noted the effect of Tafuri’s retreat from contemporary architecture:

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<sup>1</sup> Muschamp, Herbert, Cynthia Davidson, and Matthew Berman. "A Conversation with Herbert Muschamp." *ANY: Architecture New York*, no. 21 (1997): 16-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856044>.

<sup>2</sup> Lavin, Sylvia. "The Newest 'New' Criticism." *Log*, no. 3, 2004, pp. 79-80. [www.jstor.org/stable/41765667](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41765667).

“Tafuri became a repo man, hoarding criticism's valuable and uncanny ability to appreciate newness, burying it deeper and deeper in texts hermetically sealed by intentionally repellant language.”<sup>3</sup>

While much of Tafuri's work is dense—often full of countless references to architects, historians, and philosophers—and untangling its many allusions requires extensive background knowledge, Tafuri's influence was vast. Many critics and historians expounded upon his work, thereby further “hermetically sealing” architectural discourse, pushing architectural criticism into obscurity, and destroying its agency for the outside world.

Tafuri's fitful retreat from reality carried influence into the late 1980s. The MoMA's *Deconstructivist Architecture* exhibition of 1988 that exhibited the works of Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi, Coop Himmelb(l)au, and others, aimed to align architecture with ideas produced in the field of literary criticism—particularly Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction. To the architects of that exhibition, the major crisis was an internal, disciplinary one, and the work failed to adequately address any major concerns about the state of the world at the time. In 1993, Cynthia Davidson interviewed Fritz Neumeyer about the state of architecture after deconstruction:

“Maybe at the end of the 20th century, after experimenting with the literary sciences, we finally are ready to confront architecture again... I am a bit tired of all that mediation of architecture through language.”<sup>4</sup>

As academics and architects became involved with literary criticism, major newspaper outlets began hiring architecture critics to regularly write reviews of new architecture. But the discourse of academics entrenched in theory was vastly different than that of critics who wrote reviews for newspaper audiences; deconstruction had created a strong divide between the language of architectural theory and criticism of contemporary architecture in the world at large. Muschamp brought this to light in his 1997 interview with Davidson:

“There was a brief window when the major metropolitan newspapers felt that they had to have architecture critics... This past year, the L.A. Times finally hired an architecture critic after 12 years without one, but that's an exception. It's weird how few new voices there are. There has been a proliferation of people who write theoretically within the academic setting, and that's a very important phenomenon, but those writers have not managed to find a channel into writing for larger audiences. Perhaps some don't want to, some do, some are afraid.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>4</sup> Neumeyer, Fritz. "The Artless Word." *ANY: Architecture New York*, 1993, 34-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41845555>.

<sup>5</sup> Muschamp, et al., 17. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Ada Louise Huxtable, the first architecture critic for the New York Times and the first writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for criticism in general, left her position at the Times in 1982, just two years after Tafuri denounced his own involvement in contemporary architecture.

This rift, between academic writing and criticism for a broader audience, widened ever more when the Twin Towers collapsed in 2001. After the attacks, architectural criticism dipped even further into irrelevance, as some critics felt the responsibility to provide words of encouragement for any and all works of architecture—a naive false positivity that only usurped the agency of criticism to produce productive responses to chaos. Davidson lamented the lack of real critical discussion surrounding the World Trade Center rebuilding competition in 2001, and starting publishing *Log* as a response.<sup>6</sup> Crisis had suffocated criticism, and *Log* was meant to be a gasp for air.

Some critics, like Luis Fernández-Galiano, deserted the need for criticism to be critical. Fernández-Galiano threw criticism to the dogs; amidst the worldwide crises of the new millennium, he rewrote the role of criticism to be “[to offer] support and encouragement for the constructions that hope to heal rather than for those that attempt to represent the chaos of the world.”<sup>7</sup> He bemoans that “too many of us followed a ‘false messiah into the desert of deconstruction,’”<sup>8</sup> and offers that the circumstances of tumult legitimize critics to operate under the auspices of a “sadly jaded humanism.”<sup>9</sup> Fernández-Galiano’s surrender is a white flag halfway raised and weakly waved.

Sylvia Lavin responded best to this postcritical, “sadly jaded humanist” attitude during a conference with architects and critics in 2014. At the conference, architects and critics—including MOS, Sam Jacob, Sylvia Lavin, and Sarah Whiting, among others—made a bold proclamation: nothing is happening in architecture. Pai Ednie-Brown, who reported on the conference, writes: “we are in a lull, an inert and an ‘indistinguishable pool’ (Jacob), where architecture is both boring and unable to find broad-reaching relevance beyond itself (Lavin).”<sup>10</sup> Ednie-Brown continues: “Lavin suggests that the powerful issues of our time—such as global warming, disruptions of war, and economic crisis—are yet to become architectural, leaving architecture unable to contribute on a paradigmatic level.”<sup>11</sup> Lavin argues criticism can lead the charge, stating, “Contemporary criticism will, to the contrary, appear deceptively comfortable in today’s world with a swagger that only comes from a good credit rating. It will use the lessons learned by the theoretical and historical works of the past 30 years to get out of bankruptcy and become a valuable commodity of contemporary culture.”<sup>12</sup> To Lavin, the swagger of criticism lies in language, and its quixotic appeal is based in youthful beauty and pleasure.<sup>13</sup> Critics should look to Lavin

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<sup>6</sup> Ednie-Brown, Pia. "Architectural Coexistence: Twins, Logs, and the Ecology of Things." *Log*, no. 30 (2014): 14-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43631730>.

<sup>7</sup> Fernández-Galiano, Luis. "Criticism and Crisis." *Log*, no. 16 (2009): 47-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41765278>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Ednie-Brown, 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Lavin, 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

when approaching the front line. Armed with wit, cunning, and swagger, she is well equipped to leverage crisis to make global issues architectural.

Contemporary architectural criticism must look to Lavin (more swagger) over Fernández-Galiano (jaded humanism), and Muschamp (crisis criticism) over Tafuri (hermetic retreat). Perhaps architecture schools are the most loaded repository for new criticism; millennials were born into a time of crisis, and are certainly familiar with what it means to have swagger. But regardless of which critics report for duty, criticism, rather than being relegated to mere reporting (what the last Venice Architecture Biennale called “Reporting From the Front”) must leverage the crises that emerge in steady streams. Disciplinary rigor must align with linguistic clarity; writing must reinstate wit and swagger in criticism; and critics must refuse the hermetic sealing that pushed architectural discourse to the fringes when Tafuri deserted the contemporary. Architecture and criticism must refuse descriptive reporting, false humanism, and aesthetic austerity, and instead show up to the front line locked and loaded, fully armed to confront crises. Muschamp was already prepared for war in the 21st century when he said, “Criticism is about standing in front of a thing and bringing to it everything that you have, not just the naked eyeball. You bring your psyche and find the most affective means at your command to convey that experience so that readers will know why it goddamn fucking matters.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Muschamp, et al., 17.