

How to move from architectural cheerleading to architecture criticism

Mark Minkjan

Not worth sharing: visual snacks

The problem with most architectural media is that the largest share of their content is made up of visual snacks – those smooth renderings and glossy photographs we see flashing by in our social media feeds. Fast food is the quickest and easiest way to satisfy an appetite, while it hardly contains anything substantial. That’s why you’ll crave for more soon after your first snack, which again won’t benefit your health. Architectural media fill a demand for luscious images, but substantial reflection on the social and public relevance of celebrated projects is sparse. This has a detrimental impact on the condition of the architectural profession and what it produces: the built world we live in. If you were to create a live feed of the latest updates from the most-visited architectural websites and blogs – which is child’s play with all the great sharing tools available – what you would see is a constant flood of either fantasy renderings that can never become reality or stylized photographs of luxurious design scenery. Both of which have nothing to do with the real lives that most of us live. Call it the 99 percent, if you like.

Indeed, this is already an alarming observation, but what is worse is that this visual overload is hardly met with suspect. Architectural projects should be questioned for their actual functioning in reality, for their societal impact, their political meaning or their developers’ intentions. That’s just a few of the crucial

criteria that are often overlooked or ignored. Instead, designs are merely consumed as visual fast food and architecture seems to have been completely de-politicized and reduced to an aesthetic undertaking for the media that cover it.

The demand for the newest, most spectacular snacks to look at is insatiable. We continually browse the optimistic imaginations of what the future could look like and aren’t interested in what the visual treats say about a culture or mean for a society. What’s uploaded today is out-dated tomorrow. There’s an endless, vicious cycle in force: if the design is not spectacular enough, it’s not published and if it’s not published, it’s obviously not spectacular enough. To make it even more incestuous, the main consumers of these media are architects or aspiring designers. Who are they designing for? Moreover, what are architects-in-training to expect of their future career when following the media that cover their desired profession? What are architects to expect their designs to be judged on?

The media are contributing to a dumbing down of how we see architecture. Reporting on architecture is less and less about creating better cities in an equitable way, but increasingly describes individual projects without analysing architecture as a larger social project and the separate designs as an articulation of political, economic and social choices. Most design media content only consists of aggregations of blindly republished



Rendering by Urban Future Organization (UFO) and CR-design

press releases, renderings and photos that are sent in by architecture offices, while omitting interpretation. Here, the audience is withheld guidance to understand the world in which the slick projects are constructed or to decipher what they say about the culture that brings them about. Everything has to be easily digestible and instantly satisfying, and people aren't challenged to put things in perspective. By walking down the path of today's visual culture, the media have made their content attractive to both the layman and the architect, but naturally such a crowd-pleasing attitude goes at the expense of intelligent reflection.

Worth sharing: productive criticism

So that's what I think is not worth sharing. But what is worth sharing? Clearly it's not the architectural cheerleading in a media world where the coverage has become architects' PR. Architecture does not equal fashion. It is more than just a consumer good that only enhances the appearance of its buyer. Rather, the design of space has a direct effect on the world we live in. Therefore it should not just be talked about for its shapes and materials. Architecture can create value for the entire public, but it can also be exclusive terrain for the happy few, while helping those who use it to dress up their real estate investments making a fortune, leaving the rest empty-handed. Its main objective should not be to be most fashionable. Presenting it as such in the media is anything but constructive if we want to talk about how architecture can contribute to society. Instead, it should be questioned and investigated to the fullest extent. What is worth sharing today is proper architecture criticism that puts design into context, and is not tucked away in obscure magazines or the outskirts of cyberspace.

Although having become increasingly rare in today's media landscape, there are still critics who judge architecture not by its image, but by its public meaning and urban implications. They try to reveal the cracks in the shiny surface, dig out facts about the politics and economics that determine the architectural outcome and their social effect on the city. These practices are the things that deserve more sharing. Architecture is not (just) its image; it is always political. It is also always

a social and economic affair. That's where the issues at stake lie. The culture that builds it should be analysed and its effects on the world should be traced back to it. Therefore we need more experts from various fields to evaluate the built environment and broaden the focus on architecture, while letting this analysis feed into the media that scrutinize design. Architecture should be seen as a societal project. The questions that should be asked include: whose interests are served? Who profits? What does it do for a city besides looking spectacular and being expensive? Why do we – the public – need this project? Why did the local government approve of it? Of course, beauty (although a subjective, fluctuating quality) is not something negligible. In fact it should also be promoted as an enriching public value that architecture can bring, but it should be something that everyone can enjoy, not just those who can afford the Pinterest-popular architecture.

The renewed serious interest in architecture should take root again in several fields of media. Dedicated architecture media have to pick up the critical magnifying glass again, while other media should reposition architecture at the heart of the societal debate. A prime example of the latter is British newspaper *The Guardian*, which has alleviated its 'Architecture and Design Blog' to a more active and committed architecture section over the past few years, currently being one of the go-to online sources for an intelligent contextualization of architecture. Here, architectural projects and urban plans are subjected to serious scrutiny and the appearance of the designs is anything but the main topic. Instead, spatial design is regarded a civic undertaking that is the result of politics and economics and influences the well being of people. Design is only seen as the physical expression that represents dominant ideals and agendas. If more media outlets would follow this example, the public attitude towards architecture can become more critical. Simultaneously, design professionals and architecture students will recapture the awareness that they are working on a social project – instead of seeing the job as being vain set-dressers for those that actually decide how cities work – and can eventually take back a central role in urban development.

The twenty-first century architecture critic is less preoccupied with geometry, dramatic light and other visual traits, but rather focuses on what architecture does and where it comes from, analysing not only single buildings but expanding her or his focus to entire cities and cultures. From the political process that led to certain designs or plans to be realized, to the effect on the socioeconomic composition of a city, to the public gains and public expenses architecture generates. Sure, no single person can do all of this on his or her own. But with all the available sharing tools, the broad body of architecture criticism can be brought together. Urban space philosophers, hard core planning legislation experts, social critics, architects, economy writers, geographers and others should all contribute to the debate.

And no, this kind of media attention for architecture doesn't have to be boring. It shouldn't be abstract, because it is about places that people can relate to. It's about the world we live in – or want to live in – and for that reason relevant to everyone. We should be talking about the things we see, but shed light on the dark matter behind it. In an age of growing urban development pressure worldwide that crowds out cities, the real issues call for more attention, and hence for real journalism that requires time and skill. But the result is worth it, and absolutely worth sharing. So let's change our architectural media diet from fast food to multi-ingredient slow cooking. Let's shift our focus from visual quantity to urban quality.

Mark Minkjan is an urban and architectural geographer. He is co-founder of the Failed Architecture Foundation and editor in chief at failed-architecture.com. Mark is also part of Amsterdam-based Non-fiction, an office for cultural innovation.