Architecture [Criticism] or Revolution

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

Architecture [Criticism] or Revolution is an exploration in journalistic architecture criticism. The current state of journalistic architecture criticism is uninspiring. There are two few of voices, and its field of influence is too narrow. The first article details the current position of journalistic architecture criticism. It accounts its history, its voices, its influence, and its future. The second two articles are explorations in writing on architecture for the people of Columbus, Ohio. They are meant for a non-professional audience, and begin to explore ways of educating the public on issues of contemporary architecture, and calls upon them to demand better design for our city.
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Article 1: Architecture [Criticism] or Revolution

The year was 1963. The Beatles released their first album. Marvel Comics debuted X-Men. The U.S. introduced ZIP Codes. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream, and John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley were born. Robert Frost and Sylvia Plath passed away. Archigram presented its Living Cities exhibition in London. Yale opened the doors to Beinecke Library and the Art and Architecture Building. Construction began on Boston City Hall. The Pan Am Building was completed in New York City, while demolition began on Penn Station. Architecture criticism was born.

Okay, so architecture criticism has deeper roots than ‘63. But in 1963, something exciting happened. For the first time, architecture criticism opened its arms to an audience larger than that of its own practitioners, theorists, educators and biggest fans. For the first time, architecture criticism became accessible to the public, because for the first time, an architecture critic had been hired as a full-time contributor to a daily newspaper. The newspaper was The New York Times, and the critic – Ada Louise Huxtable.
Ada Louise Huxtable combined her education in art and architectural history with a passion for the city of New York, modernism, historic preservation, and an uncanny ability to attune the public to the contemporary issues of architecture and the transformative role it plays on the city. By 1968, her influence was exemplified in a *New Yorker* cartoon of two construction workers, newspaper in hand, discouraged by the discovery that “Ada Louise Huxtable already doesn’t like it!”1 The strong-willed, opinionated voice of Huxtable rang loudly in New York, reverberated across the nation, and still echoes today.2

But that was the sixties, and this is now. So what’s changed? It would be great to say that since Huxtable, Americans have adopted a musing interest in architecture – that both architects and architecture reach newspaper headlines, grace magazine centerfolds, and capture television audiences. At the water cooler, Jim starts a conversation with, “Did you see Zaha Hadid won the competition for that new building downtown?”, and over dinner, Mom reminds the family, “Don’t let me forget – Rem Koolhaas is on The Tonight Show later.”

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But, the truth is, nothing has changed. The list of newspapers that print architecture criticism still fits onto a post-it note. The reality is that with such few voices, and such little support and contribution from practicing architects and the academic community, an architecture criticism for the people will never reach more than a few curious intellectual minds that read deep enough into the printed pages of the dying newspapers.

Journalistic architecture criticism’s audience is the people. It’s not written for architecture students, professors, critics, theorists, historians and practitioners, only written by them. Buildings give shape and structure to our lives, and in many ways provide a framework to which our lives contend to, and sometimes, retaliate against. Much of our day-to-day is spent moving through, within, around, and in-between buildings. Occasionally, these buildings are architecture; when it is, architecture criticism’s role is to formulate an understanding of why.

Criticism operates as the link between professionals within a field and the public. The critic is not a reporter, and therefore the role is not to act as a translator between the architect, filmmaker, chef, author, artist, playwright, and the people, but to act as a reader. The critic reads the building, movie, plate, book, painting, and performance through his or her own critical lens. Then, it is the critic’s reading of the project that’s offered to the public, assembled into words that possess the power to awe, inspire, and educate its readers. Therefore, the architecture critic’s role is not to decode what the
architect wants to communicate to the people, or what the people want to communicate to the architect. It’s something entirely different; an art of its own.

In fact, the job of the architecture critic is distinctly different from that of its counterparts. Much of the work of film, food, literary, art, and theatre critics comes in the form of review. Films are released, restaurants open their doors, books hit the shelves, galleries debut new shows, and performances find a stage. The critic’s column shares his or her experiences with the subject, and in turn is suggestive as to whether or not it is worthwhile.

Architecture criticism rarely, if ever, serves as a consumer report. When a building is reviewed, it doesn’t always mean the public is encouraged to visit. In fact, sometimes it’s the luck of the program as to whether or not one can. If it’s a shoe store, go right ahead. If it’s a communist party headquarters, good luck. And, reviewing built work is only one part of the architecture critic’s job. For much of his reign at The New York Times, remembered architecture critic Herbert Muschamp ran two columns, Architecture Review and Architecture View. Review paid close attention to specific projects – built, un-built, in-the-works, on-the-boards, altered, restored, added to, or subtracted from. View positioned architecture, both contemporary and historical, in relation to a larger cultural discourse, and thus, broadening the role of the architecture critic to something much greater.
In a lecture entitled “Architecture Criticism: Does It Matter?”, given at Butler University in 2003, Paul Goldberger, current architecture critic for *The New Yorker*, writes that “the purpose of architecture criticism in the general media is to create a better educated, more critically aware, more visually literate constituency for architecture, and thus, presumably, increase society's demand for good design.” In theory, the more educated the public is on *good design*, the more doors will open for *good design*.

What this doesn’t mean is that if only architects had more power – if local governments, neighborhood commissions, zoning regulations, and the clients themselves would instill full trust in the architect – that the world would be a better place because of architecture. After all, if Paris would have instilled unbound trust in Le Corbusier, not much of it would be left! The American government uses a system of checks and balances to divide its power, so too is architecture kept in check by its own constraints – even if at times it seems to hold back the promise of progress.

What it means is that the more we do to illustrate to people the incredible power architecture can have on the urban environment and the human body, mind, and soul, the more people will open their minds to and invest in something new.

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Herbert Muschamp once said that being an architecture critic is to have sexual experiences about architecture.⁴ At a 2006 conference held in New York City on the subject of architectural criticism and its role in activism, this was likened to a definition put forward by Anatole France, a French literary and social critic, who defined criticism as “recording one’s adventures among masterpieces.”⁵ And Muschamp did just that. Only, Muschamp’s writing wasn’t just a transcription of his own adventures. He took his readers on the adventures with him.

Like Disneyland’s famed Peter Pan’s Flight, Muschamp’s writing is an adventure ride that lifts you from the mundane realities of the world, re-contextualizes you based on new authenticities, and leaves you enchanted by the once ordinary world in which you return. After reading Muschamp, buildings come to life and start to speak out loud. And his adventures stay with you. It’s impossible to ever enter a tired, smoke-filled bar without feeling somehow enchanted by the sense of mystery offered in its thick haze having read Thank You for Not Smoking (as if You Had a Choice).⁶

Muschamp remains individuated from his colleagues in his acute ability to see architecture, and specifically, contemporary architecture. He paired this with a talent for writing in a style that coincided with the period of architecture in which he was writing.

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⁵ Ibid., page 29

The time was the 1990’s, a period marked by an increasingly attuned interest in phenomenology and an architecture of effects, where having a sexual experience about architecture seemed somehow appropriate.

But for Muschamp, it’s not his design background that enables him to see. In an interview with Herbert Muschamp in ANY 21, Cynthia Davidson asks him to explain the responsibility of the critic. “To be turned on,” states Muschamp, straight-forward and to the point. He clarifies what it is to be turned on by layering another critic’s definition onto his own. Walter Pater, a nineteenth-century British literary critic, said “that the critic’s most important asset is the power to be moved in the presence of beautiful objects.” For Muschamp, being able to see comes somewhat as a gift – a gift that requires no particular knowledge or specific education.

Muschamp did have a gift, but he also had a design education. He studied architecture at Parsons School of Design, and then furthered his studies at the Architectural Association in London, where he, like most journalistic architecture critics, focused his education on architectural history and theory. But despite having a background in architectural history and theory, Muschamp was able to move beyond writing about architecture as ‘symptoms’ as many of his colleagues do. Rather, he talks about contemporary

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8 Ibid., page 17

architecture in a way that speaks to the experience of a building, and begins to make sense of its idiosyncrasies in relation to a larger cultural context.

It’s clear why critics coming from an architectural history and theory background tend to use ‘symptoms’ to begin to put forward an understanding of architecture. At its simplest, the study of architectural history and theory is the study of stylistic movements. To understand and recognize the symptoms of a movement is to understand the architecturalization of the thoughts and ambitions behind it. What a design education adds to history and theory is the ability to think spatially and thus, experientially. It’s one thing to discuss Frank Lloyd Wright’s prairie style by its hugging of the land, low hip roofs and projecting eaves, its ribbon windows and the emphasis they place on the horizon, furthered by drawing on the social and political implications of these moves. But to apply a spatial vocabulary – to discuss the compression and expansion of spaces, where one enters into an incredibly low, dark, often narrow passage, overwhelmed by feelings of claustrophobia and unease, only to be released into a vast open space, drenched in light, with unbound views of the infinite horizon, marked by an overpowering sense of relief and awe that consumes the body and mind – is something greater. Often, great spatial effects are the result of a detail so minute; only the most careful and attentive eye can detect it.

On the other hand, the connection journalistic critics make to social, political, and economic issues is something architecture critics writing for the profession rarely master.
Above anyone else, Paul Goldberger can formulate an understanding of the context in which a project was designed – what was so specific about the social, political, and economic environment surrounding the project and the role these forces played in somehow determining its fate.\(^\text{10}\) But when given the opportunity, Goldberger rarely sites contemporary examples, especially in an arena in which it is so critical to do just that. Within Goldberger’s own definition for the purpose of architecture criticism lays an implication that the current state of American contemporary architecture is somehow below par and that the bar must be raised. Presumably, the bar can be raised through architecture criticism’s education of the public, “increas[ing] society’s demand for good design”\(^\text{11}\) But on June 25, 2008, Paul Goldberger starred as a guest on The Colbert Report and gave a different impression of the current state of contemporary architecture in the United States. The show goes something like this:

Stephen Colbert starts by sharing a rendering of his own plans for a few architectural improvements to his studio. It includes a modernist tower placed at a 45 degree angle to the ground, featuring a rollercoaster, water slide, and enormous LED sign board advertising the show, complete with a disco ball suspended over the street and topped by an American flag and satellite dish. Unfortunately, the plans dissolve when funding falls through, because quote, “Apparently, no matter how much Goldschlager you pour down

\(^{10}\) For example, Paul Goldberger has written extensively on the subject of 9/11 and the World Trade Center competition. His writing critically details how economic, political, and social forces have aligned to somehow determine the fate of architecture. See his book: Up From Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York.

a goose, it will not lay a golden egg.” Colbert earns a laugh from the studio audience, but it serves as a clever introduction and commentary on the unlimited budget, over-the-top *architecture of extravagances* in Asia and the Middle East.

Colbert notes that because of America’s financial situation, many major building projects have been placed on hold, while construction is “booming overseas, in places like Qatar and Kazakhstan.” He shows an image of the Burj Al Arab in Dubai and points, “That should be ours!” followed by a rendering of Foster and Partners’ Crystal Island in Moscow. Colbert proclaims “Skylines are symbols of power and prosperity,” demands an explanation, and introduces Goldberger:  

[Applause]  
COLBERT: Sir, simple question: how do we win this one?  
GOLDBERGER: I think we already have won.  
COLBERT: What are you talking about?! We no longer have the tallest building in the world; they’re building these huge buildings overseas. We’re not even in the race.  
GOLDBERGER: I didn’t know whether mine was bigger than yours is really the most important thing.  
[Laughter]  
COLBERT: It is. Everything you needed to know about size, you learned in fifth grade.  
[Laughter]  
COLBERT: What is America doing in the field of architecture that’s in any way exciting?  
GOLDBERGER: We’re actually doing everything, because our architects are building all those buildings, so we’re making all the money from them, we just aren’t wasting money putting them up.

It’s this last answer that’s so problematic. Colbert bows his assumption that the super-tall arms race is the most exciting thing happening in architecture, giving Goldberger a chance to assert his “expert” opinion as to what is. Goldberger’s answer: money. What

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is America doing that’s in any way exciting? We’re making money by designing contemporary buildings for other countries that are a waste of money to build.

Surely Goldberger doesn’t believe contemporary architecture is a waste of money. Among a circle of architects, his answer would have served as a witty, fitting response. But, to Colbert’s audience, the Burj Al Arab and Crystal Island represent all things contemporary, and Goldberger’s answer serves to perpetuate the cliché that contemporary architecture is expensive and superfluous. Simultaneously, Goldberger reduces architecture to a profession that favors money-making over the enrichment of the built environment. This may come as a surprise to some, but I don’t think architects are in it for the money.

On November 16, 2009, Paul Goldberger returns to the set of The Colbert Report. After introducing Goldberger’s new book, entitled Why Architecture Matters, Colbert invites, “What is some architecture that matters?”13 It’s a hard question to answer. As it turns out, there’s a lot of it.14 But the opportunity presented here is to name something contemporary, and explain why it matters. Goldberger’s two examples are the Lincoln Memorial and the University of Virginia.

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14 This is also how Goldberger begins to answer the question. “What really matters? Oh, gosh. There’s a lot of it. I would say Lincoln Memorial, […] University of Virginia in Charlottesville, […]” Source: Ibid.
While my mom, an avid watcher of *The Colbert Report*, may see something different in these buildings than we do, she easily appreciates why they are important. What she doesn’t understand is why the Seattle Public Library matters. By using the Lincoln Memorial and University of Virginia as his examples, Goldberger verifies in people their desire to continue new building in a historicist language.\(^\text{15}\)

The fact that Stephen Colbert starred an architecture critic as a guest on his show in the first place is astonishing. This is the opportunity architecture criticism has been waiting for – a chance to raise its voice by capturing the attention of a new audience.

Newspapers primarily reach an older demographic of highly educated readers, and while newspaper readership is declining within all age groups, it is declining the fastest amongst young readers.\(^\text{16}\) Younger people are much more likely to find their news on the internet through a combination of mainstream news sites and opinion-based blogs, or to turn to the cynical and comedic reporting of television programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.\(^\text{17}\)

**Journalistic architecture criticism isn’t a hot topic in architecture schools and academic circles. In fact, when it does come up, rolling eyes, shaking heads, and sighs of**

\(^{15}\) The desire for people to build in a historicist language here is in reference to historicist imitation through materials (most often brick) and ornamental details, but that by focusing on imitation, these buildings miss the clever devices and motifs that characterize their predecessors (looks like it, but doesn’t act like it).


disinterest convey a general distaste for the subject. But the last newspaper isn’t far from its run on the printing press, and this is an opportunity for the profession of architecture to look critically at journalistic architecture criticism, investigate the role it has played, the ambitions it has carried, the contributors it has relied on, and the opinions it has voiced. The aspirations of architecture criticism have always been strong, but its voices have always been too few and at times, uninspiring. With the current economic crisis, building has stalled and architecture firms are struggling to find work. More and more professionals are without jobs, and the number of students graduating from architecture schools is increasing. It’s time we expand our role, and start talking to more people outside the field in ways that speak to the contemporary lifestyles of today.

While blogs are growing exponentially, the scope of their potential influence remains narrow. Blogs have to be found, and the people in search of architecture blogs tend to be people that have an established interest in the field. If the idea of journalistic architecture criticism is to reach out and educate the lay public that would otherwise have no real knowledge of architecture, blogs aren’t the answer.

Maybe we look to technology that’s been around as long as architecture criticism itself. Network television. In the average American home, televisions are turned on for an astounding 8 hours and 14 minutes each day!\(^{18}\) And television offers what blogs, YouTube, Podcasts, and the internet do not – limitation. Even when the average viewer

is exposed to over one hundred different channels (118.6 to be exact)\textsuperscript{19}, that still only means that at any given time, the options of what one can watch are limited to that many programs (rather than being unbound and infinite like the internet).

With the proliferation of reality television, mainstream viewers are tuning in for entertainment, but get much more in return. Reality television is often based on the competition model, in which contenders are in a race against one another, and the clock, in a series of challenges within their desired profession. Episodes end with juries of respected critics reviewing the work of each competitor, and eliminating the weakest performance. You’ve seen the shows – Project Runway, American Idol, Top Chef, America’s Next Top Model, The Apprentice, Hell’s Kitchen… and the list keeps growing. But it’s the professions that capitalize the most. Take Top Chef for example. Viewers whom know nothing beyond the clichés begin to learn the value of contrasting different properties like textures, colors, and flavor profiles, that presentation is imperative, and that sometimes the most surprising combinations of foods can work in ways never imagined. Before long, viewers begin to understand the distinction between food and culinary art. Just imagine if television could do that for architecture. If at the least, people began to formulate an understanding of the difference between buildings and architecture, and the ways in which architecture can enhance the built environment and in turn, our lives, it would mean huge strides for architecture criticism and the profession.

You can imagine more types of shows featuring smart, attentive architecture critics – documentary style travel programs that visit important contemporary buildings around the world. One episode looks closely at Dutch housing; another visits Shanghai as the city prepares for Expo 2010. Contemporary architects are interviewed, and the show draws connections to larger cultural issues relative to the city, its politics, social agendas, economy, and people. And in turn, new outlets for journalistic architecture criticism have been invented and the influence of architecture begins to grow.

In 1931, Le Corbusier’s *Towards a New Architecture* was published and within it he cried, “Architecture or Revolution”. Architecture was in need of a massive change to catch up to the modern lifestyles of the time. If not, an uprising, or revolution would ensue.\(^\text{20}\) Today, it is architecture *criticism* that’s in need of an overhaul.

Architecture [Criticism] or Revolution.

Revolution can be avoided.\(^\text{21}\)

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Article 2: Building Momentum

During an intermission at The Second City in Chicago, a tap on the shoulder drew my attention to a stagehand collecting fodder for the show’s improvised encore. Crouched chair-side with paper and pencil in hand, he polled our table for the most important issue in the upcoming presidential election. Being with a group from the Knowlton School of Architecture at The Ohio State University, we naturally offered architecture.

Our contribution was tongue-in-cheek, as we were well aware that the image of a nation’s architecture conjures up the nationalistic projects of unsavory political movements – Italian Fascism’s stripped-down classicism, or Nazi Germany’s monumentally-scaled oppressive works. But, we were intrigued by how the performers would engage architecture as an issue of national importance.

Unsurprisingly, architecture wasn’t a befitting complement to the comedians’ bank of stock political wit, and fared poorly in achieving either a good source of humor or laughter. Yet, in the performance’s plain awkwardness (and at the expense of the show’s encore), it evidenced the fact that most people just don’t understand contemporary issues related to architecture. And, while it may seem absurd to consider architecture an issue worthy of political concern, it is a critical issue at a city level.
As a barometer of contemporary design, the Columbus chapter of the American Institute of Architects (the professional organization for architects in the U.S.) recently announced its 2009 Design Awards. Five buildings designed by local firms were awarded – two for honor and three for merit. Selected from a pool of 51 submissions, the five awards, representing three local firms, stand for the most interesting and intelligent design work in town. And while these five projects excite local designers and raise the bar for contemporary architecture in Columbus, the overwhelming majority of the submitted work doesn’t come close.

Buildings are where we sleep, eat, work, study, cook, shop, watch movies, visit exhibitions, wait for airplanes, drink beer and attend comedy shows. Buildings shape our lives, and our movement from one building to the next shapes our days. Thus, an architect’s transformation of the city is intrinsically tied to our quality of life.

The profession of architecture is divided into two troupes: service professionals and speculative designers. The former engages the client, exceeding their needs in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. The latter engages the city, using the project as a means to examine culture, critique history, analyze context, investigate materials and reorganize social spaces, moving beyond the provision of shelter to discover something greater.
However, not all firms are easy to typecast. The five projects recognized by AIA Columbus’s Design Awards start to blur the aspirations of service provision and speculative ambition. These five buildings do more than provide their clients with usable square footage – they recognize what’s most interesting about their individual programs and begin to operate on their built environments.

In an addition to the Grange Insurance Headquarters, NBBJ attaches a transparent fin of offices to the existing building to frame a new public space that engages High Street and pulls pedestrians into the Brewery District and onto Front Street. On campus at The Ohio State University, Acock Associates Architects takes a dark and concealing tower and transforms it into one that’s light and revealing as the thick wall of the stacks is replaced with a curtain of glass, revealing an abundance of books in true color at the Thompson Memorial Library. In a Cleveland Clinic addition, NBBJ exploits the whiteness of the hospital interior as an opportunity for the building’s public space to operate as an art gallery. By interiorizing private spaces and pushing shared public spaces to the exterior in a project for new student housing at the Columbus College of Art and Design, Acock Associates Architects illuminates the façade as a billboard for student activity and socialization. And at Pistacia Vera, Jonathan Barnes streamlines the interior of a historic building in German Village as an operating room for pastry-making and tasting.

Today’s Columbus boasts an energetic arts culture and a progressive academic presence, yet aside from the momentary relief of a handful of AIA award winners each year,
remains a city full of buildings. Here, the service professional is ubiquitous, and the architectural environment suffers from the resulting banality. But it wasn’t long ago that the service professional’s portfolio was responsible for many of the greatest buildings and moments within the urban fabric. Frank Packard, Columbus’s most prolific architect, designed countless buildings at the turn of the twentieth century that still stand in high regard. Today, it’s the five projects awarded by AIA Columbus that begin to push beyond what’s acceptable in satisfying the client for the creation of something greater.

So, how can we jazz up the service professional’s everyday routine? Montreal, capital of Quebec, Canada, has one idea. Commerce Design Montreal, an incentive program founded in 1995, seeks to revamp its streets by demonstrating to various businesses the value to be found in design investments. Each year, a group of architects, designers and prominent members of the community comprise a jury that awards 20 projects. Unlike the AIA Columbus Awards, Commerce Design Montreal awards both the architect and the business: the architect recognized for design, the business recognized for their investment in design. The 20 businesses then land themselves in an intense advertising campaign for the duration of the summer. Mayoral support of the businesses, design guides, walking tours and promotional pop-up kiosks at community events spur added interest.

For restaurants, bars, stores, galleries, cafés, funeral homes and laundromats, Commerce Design Montreal has fostered a much greater degree of interesting design work from
local firms. And, while the program falls short in incentivizing other types of programs (housing, healthcare, educational, institutional, civic, etc.), what it does is recognize that the more trust a client builds in the architect, the more freedom the architect has to act. As businesses undertake renovations and new-build projects, they seek out award-winning firms, leaving their design ideas behind in favor for the architect’s as the design expert.

In 2012, Columbus will celebrate its bicentennial, and in preparation, over 800 million dollars is being pumped into downtown revitalization. While it may be too late to have any effect on the quality of these projects, their completion will only spur more development, and with development comes opportunity. Let’s take this opportunity to push our community leaders, businesses and architects, and call for even more good design. The era of change is now, and 2012 is just around the corner. Let’s just hope the world doesn’t end that December.
I’m standing on Thirteenth Avenue facing east, mentally preparing for the duel I’m about to engage in. My opponent: the new Ohio Union at The Ohio State University. I march 100 paces, hands clasped together cop-style, and pause.

3… 2… 1… *BANG!*

…Nothing. Not even a minor brick wound. With a vast army of Union-loving staff and students organized into hundreds of brigades, the building stands prepared to thwart any attack.

I confess -- I have fantastical duels with buildings. The reason is simple: missed opportunities. Today, it’s a missed opportunity on a campus.

For more than a hundred years, the Ohio State campus provided a stage for constant reinterpretation based on the spirit of the times, the ever-changing character of the university, and the evolution of curricula. Only recently has a shift in the conception of the campus project changed that pattern.
When the university opened its doors in 1873, the original University Hall positioned itself as an English manor, occupying the highest ground near the Olentangy River and overlooking the picturesque Mirror Lake Hollow. As the campus grew, buildings developed organically around a central, open space nicknamed the “Oval” due to its loose geometric resemblance. By 1904, the university was looking to develop beyond the Oval, and commissioned Frank Packard for a master plan. Packard, Columbus’s most prolific architect, had already designed and built several campus buildings for the university, including such notables as Orton and Hayes Halls, as well as the late Armory and Lord Hall.

Packard’s plan formalized the Oval around a dominant east-west axis featuring a cruciform fountain at its center and terminated by a new library at its west end. Although this beaux-arts plan was never implemented, the newly renovated Thompson Memorial Library evidences its influence. Ultimately, Packard’s plan fell to the sword of a 1909 Olmsted Brothers plan calling for the simple overlay of a regular grid as the organizational strategy for future buildings, leaving us a complex campus that’s part English manor, part loose-organic, part beaux-arts, and part urban grid.

Likewise, the buildings of the campus are comprised of an equally fascinating mix of styles, from the Richardsonian-Romanesque Orton and Hayes Halls, to the French Feudal Armory, Neoclassical Thompson Memorial Library, Brutalist Cunz Hall, Modernist-schemed Lincoln and Morrill Towers, and Post-Modern Wexner Center, each
representing the contemporary architecture of the time. Only recently has the trend of matching new buildings with one another as cookie-cutter reveries of the old emerged. Enter the new Ohio Union.

With the new Ohio Union, the built representation of Ohio State as a progressive institution as exemplified by the Wexner Center and Knowlton Hall slows to a screaming halt. Its design recalls historical models, only rather than pick up on the lessons in site, proportions, and individuality that its historical neighbors so readily offer, its references are reduced to a grab bag of pure aesthetics that have gone awry. It’s a massive building – relative in scale to a big-box retailer, but disguised by arches, bays, porches, punched windows, curtain walls, and a schizophrenic catalogue of corner devices. In plan, there is a littering of glorified spaces made distinct by their shape (some round, some octagonal, some elliptical, and some angular) or their massive scale, but the experience of these is hardly pleasant, for there’s no way to ever find them. In fact, in order to reach the octagonal double-height study lounge that’s complete with an oculus and decked out in wooden finishes and built-in seating, one must trek down the most banal, narrow, and endless office corridors in order to find it.

The building in no way acknowledges what’s across High Street. Thirteenth Avenue hits the façade in the least of celebrated ways, with nothing to draw one towards the building in the way one is drawn to the Wexner Center from Fifteenth or Sullivant Hall down the alley of Campus Place.
Once inside, the “great hall” is as uninspiring as a suburban shopping mall. And no surface in the entire building was spared in the great scarlet and gray explosion that took place sometime in its construction. It’s been absorbed like a bad stain on a new sweater by the terrazzo, carpet, drywall, furnishings, and even bathroom tile.

But the original Union, Enarson Hall, sits just across the South Oval and stands the test of time. It served as the first student union at any public university, which defined a critical moment in the history of higher education. From then forward, the university represented something much greater than a powerhouse of knowledge; it stood for the all-encompassing experience of higher education through its academic, social and cultural intricacies.

Because of this newfound twentieth-century investment in life outside the classroom as sponsored by the institution, no longer is our interest in the contemporary American campus captivated by the networks of stable environments defined by the quadrangles, yards, courts, and object buildings as imported from the models of Oxford and Cambridge. Rather, the moments we find most interesting in today’s campuses are the dynamic spaces in-between these stable environments, the spaces invigorated with the sociality and spontaneity of student life and flow.

So, how are the in-between spaces treated at Ohio State today? Well, they mostly consist of asphalt-paved roads lined with concrete sidewalks, surface parking, and pockets of
disconnected and isolated green spaces. The Oval of course is the exception; its concrete walks trace the university’s early paths created by hundreds of feet carving away at the lawn daily, like the patches of dirt beneath the swings of elementary school yards.

Within other green spaces, corners, and nooks of campus, we find this same phenomena happening today. Yet the moment the lawn begins to show signs of wear, the new-born path lays slain to a series of posts and chains that choke access in all directions. The fascinating fluidity of campus pedestrian flow, a lesson so ably learned a century ago, is all but forgotten today.

The contemporary American campus embraces the complexity of pedestrian flow and activity amidst the in-between. Pedestrians on campus don’t follow the same rules as pedestrians in the city. For instance, while walking through a neighborhood, one typically abides by the pattern of existing streets and sidewalks, as the privatization of the American lawn restricts pedestrians from cutting through green space as a means of getting from point A to point B. On campus however, all users posses ownership over the land and therefore despite an existing infrastructural network of streets and sidewalks, the fastest route between point A and point B prevails, even if it’s one that cuts across manicured lawns, over low-lying obstacles such as shrubs and retaining walls, or through buildings themselves.
And, just as the campus pedestrian doesn’t follow the same conventions as the urban pedestrian, the notion of campus site doesn’t follow the same conventions as urban site. Traditionally, architectural projects are given a site restricted by political boundaries and land ownership. At the university however, the entire campus is negotiable, and therefore conventional predispositions of site boundaries are dismissed in favor for the opportunity for buildings to be designed with greater relation to and control over networks of flow and movement at an amplified scale.

One building on Ohio State’s campus that exemplifies an interest in the in-between and the unique opportunities presented by the campus project is Peter Eisenman’s Wexner Center for the Arts. Rather than providing a traditional site bounded by dotted lines overlaid onto the plan of campus, the project’s competition brief offered an alternative: a loosely bounded zone in which the building should fall within. Unlike the runners-up, whose schemes seemed to draw in their own dotted-lined boundaries, Eisenman’s entry took advantage of the brief and a seemingly unbuildable slot of space, slipping between two existing buildings a pedestrian passage to which the building is organized along.

And, just 100 miles to our southwest lays a university advancing their position as Ohio’s most progressive campus. Initiated in 1991, the University of Cincinnati has commissioned an always-in-the-works campus plan by landscape architecture firm Hargreaves Associates that incessantly reevaluates its network of public spaces. Inserted into this plan are contemporary buildings designed by architects that pay close attention
to site and context. With each commission, the campus plan transforms to accommodate new passages, nodes, and knuckles of public space. The success of this plan is its ambition to see the campus not in its original disposition of streets and parcels of land, but as one continuous site, where contemporary spaces mesh with the historic, private spaces mesh with the public, indoor spaces mesh with the outdoor, and green spaces mesh with the urban to produce a complex whole one could never lose interest in.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned from the Food Network, it’s that the chef with the most unusual combination of contrasting sensations of taste and perception, be it sweet and savory, light and heavy, or smooth and crunchy, is always the last one standing. Ohio State’s campus plate has always offered an interesting medley with exciting bursts of color and texture. Let’s not let today’s ingredients simmer to a flavorless gruel.
References


