EVALUATING ARCHITECTURE: WHERE PERFORMANCE AND REFLECTION MEET

By Bernard Colenbrander

Today, it has become unclear what criteria to use to criticize architecture. What grounds the critic's critique? The 'Common Ground' called for during last year's Venice Architecture Biennale seems further away than ever. Architectural historian and critic Bernard Colenbrander sees a way out using academia's current inclination to make architectural research more scientific, to create objectified criteria for judgment and evaluation. Is the school becoming the main driver of a new way to be critical?

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The evaluation of architecture in general, and a single building in particular, suffers from the social sensitivities between the designer and the observer. These sensitivities have their origins in a certain vagueness of the standards of judgment, typical for our time. What makes a building a *good* building? Which rights are bestowed on an observer to assess a building as a *bad* building? Practicing criticism myself during the nineties in the pages of *Archis* I had my hesitations and tried to avoid the simple choice between good or bad. Understanding the genesis of a design without prejudice, explaining the possible differences between what was intended or drawn and what was built, seemed more important than formulating a one-directional opinion. I probably have not succeeded on every occasion, because having an opinion is easier than slowly shaping an idea. Design always has a strong base in contingency and free choice, which undoubtedly has its influence on what the observer is able to deduce. However, at the very least including context and history in a reflection on a building or design creates a bedding of facts and circumstantial evidence. It makes the 'how' and 'why' of a design easier to explain. But sophisticated as the preliminary research may have been, the legitimacy of the judgment, if I had any, remained difficult. The problem was also to cope with the subjective overtones or undercurrents of the written piece that would always and rightfully attract the immediate attention of the designers whose work was scrutinized. If there is a pitfall for critics, its theme clearly is easy subjectivism without proof.

Helpful was – and still is – the distinction made by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe between two types of critical judgment. On the one hand he distinguished a *destructive* category of criticism, on the other a *productive* category. Naturally identifying himself with the point of view of the artist, Goethe preferred the productive criticism, which is meant to clarify the intentions of the artist, no more and no less. Doing this, the critic adopts a role of empathy, while the destructive critic does the complete opposite: he simply applies an absolute standard (in architecture for example the standard of Vitruvian correctness) to the artwork under study, to ring the alarm when something deviates from the standard.

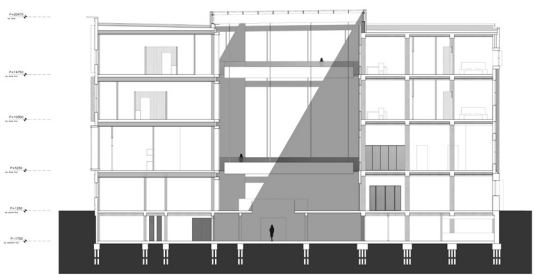
Both roles still have their urgency today, but also have their problems. In his dominant empathy the productive critic is condemned to an obedience that hampers reaching the full depth of criticism. He will inevitably turn into a yes-man. The destructive type of criticism however, also has its flaws. The problem in postmodern times is, of course, the absence of a shared standard. Any notion of a common idea is invalid from the beginning. Therefore it is also impossible to determine if, how, and when the standard is violated. In the arts there is no domain of life left that can be considered inaccessible. The Dutch novelist Arnon Grunberg addressed this state of affairs in his typically witty way: "The freedoms that the arts have acquired is double coined. In name of the arts almost anything can be said or written, but the price that the arts have to pay is that they are condemned to the circus tent: next to the arts sits the woman with the beard." So, how valuable still is the position of the artist? "He is a midget who thinks that he is a king."[1]

The absence of a standard causes a persistent volatility of contents. Critics today who make claims to fixed standards struggle with a lack of corresponding authority. Perhaps one can find consolation in the fundamentally ambivalent 'pedantic' role that the Dutch

EVIDENCE-BASED DESIGN

In this particular case, the full *Herengracht* was chosen as a study area. Students registered and mapped what had happened to more than 500 buildings in this area in six historical phases, starting in 1770.[5] The research concentrated on changes in facade, streetscape, typology, style, and silhouette. Discoveries were, for example, that when distinguishing between base, middle, and top of the facades, the top was adapted more often than the middle and the bottom. By far most of the changes took place before the middle of the twentieth century: the city image being frozen afterwards. More influential were developments inside the buildings: building consolidation, combining individual parcels into larger units, was identified as an influential process affecting the building typology. It was also noted that the silhouette of the Herengracht became increasingly flatter over the centuries, while the building height gradually grew, as did the volume. Another slow trend was the decrease of mixed functionality within the buildings: approaching the current condition where residential and commercial functions seem to exclude one another.

After the initial research we decided to define the design brief as finding possible solutions to the noted threats, especially consolidation resulting in larger building volumes per function. This increase as such is not something that could be denied or reversed and we were opposed to advocating the reconstruction of original buildings. Instead this project offers a solution for a 'large-scale' program, adapting to the intrinsic qualities and historic value of existing buildings.[6] It tries to do both: accept the functional needs, but also the constraints of the context. Choosing the former headquarters of the municipal telephone service as an object for redesign, the solution was not to be found in redesigning the facades, but in turning to the inside of the block. By rearranging the inner court between two monumental canal facades, space is created for the Amsterdam Fashion Hotel, a function that suits the present demands on the canal zone. The facades remain nearly intact, while a voluminous program is given elbow-room. Far from the wish to create something spectacular, the design task is interpreted as a response to a real problem, diagnosed during thorough research. Doing just that, without any virtuosity, this project probably comes closest to evidence-based design.



Section of the Herengracht 295 – Singel 340, Amsterdam by Kevin Claus, 2012.

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critic Joost Meuwissen adopted in the mid-eighties, to escape from the arbitrariness of good and bad taste. Meuwissen stated that the pedantic critic, like the destructive critic, accepts the work of art not as an incidental creation but within the frame of a fixed standard. At the same time he cultivates a distance towards the specific architecture under scrutiny, because his loyalty has wider dimensions. The pedantic critic only identifies with architecture and her eternal traditions in general. A context like this may dangerously wither the work under review, which "is why it is perhaps understandable that in many cases when I [Joost Meuwissen] write about a building I do not visit them. I do not go there to look at them. Those buildings are located in impossible places like Lelystad. I have enough with the floor plans, sections and facades."[2]

Following Meuwissen, a serious critic nowadays cannot be satisfied with the rules of a specific building. What is built here and now may even leave him completely detached. His heart and soul connects only with architecture as a general cultural venture stretched out in time. He may hope for a fruitful connection between the two, but the specific and the general do not easily connect. It depends on the abstractions of the design drawings, more than on the physical reality of the realized building. Keeping the noisy contemporary world at a distance, Meuwissen could rightly claim that the architecture of modernity is an architecture of "slowly forgetting the classical forms". In fact, he added, it has become impossible to shape a coherent idea of buildings produced after the baroque, "the last style in which the development of architecture was essentially cultural".[3]

The remarks of Meuwissen haunted me after I first read them, experiencing them as an almost claustrophobic confinement of my intellectual room to move as a critic. It may be no coincidence that he himself virtually stopped writing about buildings of his own era after his disheartening conclusions concerning present day architecture. The professional debate about the meaning of architecture as a cultural activity continued to deteriorate in the nineties leaving the stage open for other categories of reflection on architecture: mainly through journalism and commercial marketing. This expansion of media attention towards architecture indeed underlines a new popularity of the discipline, including the emergence of architect superstars with global renown. But this popularity misses the support of an intellectual debate. Meuwissen may have been right, with his fear of architecture 'slowly forgetting'. This perspective of an end game, where 'forgetting' will have reached its ultimate conclusion, is devastating for those who still feel that architecture has specific origins that remain valid; for those who feel that architecture needs critics that dare speak out with arguments that survive the trends of the day.

Research and Design

It may be worthwhile to compare the poverty of present day architectural criticism with the treatment that architecture receives in academic environments. It seems that there are parallels and related escape routes from an imagined end game where architecture is reduced to complete contingency of free style. To start with the parallels, at architecture schools design is all over the place, and is even appreciated in its formal qualities, but the academic prestige connected to artistic performance is negligible. Universities wish to excel in research, so the problem with architecture here is not the absence of full-grown criticism, but the unclarity of what a design may contribute to research goals. For this reason architecture schools have invested energy, time, and money into stimulating the relationship between design and research.

Design is part of academic practice in various ways. For instance, built artifacts, plans, and visions are the first subject of research for any architectural historian. These form the stepping-stones of evolutionary patterns that can be traced through the history of facts and incidents. For historians, design plays the role of a fixed and static *subject*. Design as a *means* of research however, is something completely different – and it is in this area that the interaction between the two can become tense and dynamic. Design techniques may function

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in academic practice as a *method* to acquire knowledge and as a crucial extension of research, meant to *test* a certain hypothesis. Design may visualize what otherwise would remain out of sight. This is an intriguing topic for reflection, also for the debate on architectural criticism: in both the academic and the critical reflection of architecture the core issue is the dynamic interaction between the artistic performance (the drawing, the design) and the intellectual reflection (the ideas, the words), both taken as dynamic entities in their own right. Both the academic researcher and the critic ground their analysis in a discussion of options and outcomes, establishing afterwards the quality of a design in light of context and alternatives. So they share basic habits.

During the last decade it has become urgent for architectural faculties to develop strategies to improve understanding of how design may be used successfully in academic terms. The background for this urgency is that in many cases architectural faculties have their domicile in a scientific environment where the quality assessment of research output has become increasingly strict and bureaucratic. In the competition between sciences, architecture has proven to be a lame duck, because the academic importance of design, as the core of the discipline, can't be substantiated.

But why not? It seems possible to come up with some kind of proof. In architecture we tend to concentrate on the physical artifact. Design, in that sense, is a mental projection in the shape of a prototype, model, or drawing, of which the attributes, specifications, characteristics, and qualities can be observed and tested. It is not too daring to compare an architectural design with an experiment in the natural sciences: the value of such an experiment is also based on the checking of the hypothesis established at the start. Accepted academic conventions deliver a framework for judgment: such is the case within natural sciences as it is within architecture, albeit with architecture these conventions all too often remain an implicit category of judgment. But even when we accept that design in architecture is comparable with the experiment in the natural sciences,

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architecture still fails in academic competition. The problem may be that the *quality* of a design is difficult to assess in scientifically maintainable terms, because a fundamental feature of an architectural design escapes the routine of scientific evaluation. This seems to be the same feature as that on which the judgment of the critic depends. In architecture *aesthetics* is as important as technological or practical characteristics. Architecture, in other words, is also – and even inevitably – about *beauty* and *taste* – and these two are not scientifically verifiable, at least not as easily as the verification of technique or performance.

That beauty and taste are impalpable for verification, while being the essence of what architects aim for, points to a severe problem for architectural research at universities, very much related to the issue of judgment in architectural criticism. While university departments of civil engineering, structural design, and building physics may easily concentrate on calculations alone, architecture naturally crosses borders to the domain of more ephemeral categories of judgment. If one were only able to consolidate the intellectual performance embodied in a design, it might be expected that a reliable judgment is waiting just around the corner. In the meantime institutions are starting to recognize that the different character of architecture, being also an art, is not necessarily a stumbling block in scientific surroundings. A recent official investigation into the apparent problems of integrating architecture into a scientific format came to the clear conclusion that it is quite possible to measure the quality of what is produced, as long as the comparisons are made *within disciplines*.[4] In other words: it depends on the clarity of standards that are created *within architecture*, if the

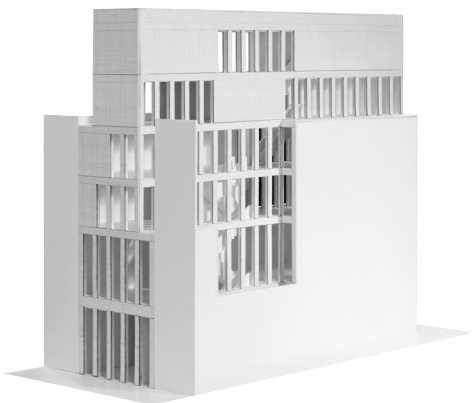
Research by design may help to revive a critical culture far outside academia.

discipline may be considered a science or not. A standard for measuring the quality of architecture can't possibly be as sharp edged as in the natural sciences. The criteria will be more subjective, but that does not exclude effectiveness, if used with care and serious knowledge. There are various parameters that seem suitable for judging the quality of a design; they may not solve the ideological problems of the modern condition that disarmed Joost Meuwissen, but they are at least able to support a critical evaluation of an architectural performance with simple, imitable logic.

The successful use of parameters in architecture implies both theoretical expertise and practical experience. Opinions as such have no value for the work to be done. Technical originality of a design however, is something that can be determined very well, simply by comparing the design under review with what is already known. The 'state of the art' in architecture is not a hermetic concept, but even with loosely drawn borders of what defines architecture it is still possible to test the methodological coherence of a design. A design can be based on a tabula rasa and therefore follow the autono-

ANALOGOUS DESIGN

This project is based on a time-consuming investigation of the logic of parceling the plots of the various extension plans of Amsterdam during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[7] The research borrowed from the work of architectural historians, like Jaap Evert Abrahamse, who has accentuated in his recent dissertation the pragmatic intentions with which the plots of the canal zone were shaped and divided.[8] In the three dimensions of realized canal houses the result must be considered as the sum of individual interpretations of how a house should look like, determined by individual needs and tastes. At the same time technological, typological, and stylistic conventions have clearly contributed to an archetypical standard for the Amsterdam canal house. Complexity enters the scene when one tries to apply this research as a starting point for a design. What could be a relevant new interpretation of the deeply rooted canal zone house? The pragmatic plotting of the canal zone has already led to an exuberant collection of architectural solutions, culminating in the superb architecture of Hendrick de Keyser, Adriaen Dortsman, and Philps Vingboons. Thinking about a relevant new chapter in this story of heroic architecture, the next step would involve a question of program. In programmatic terms the house as such does not deliver a very valuable source of inspiration anymore. Issues of program have become more or less architecturally indifferent. But perhaps the solution could be found in architecture itself: in themes that only address specific building characteristics. This is what has been done here, concentrating on designs for three plots, each with their own dominant architectural theme: respectively the entrance of light, the distribution of rooms, and the circulation patterns.



The House of Light by Martijn Schlatmann, 2010.

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mous behavior of free form, only to be evaluated within its own set of rules. In a different methodological setting a design may be derived from the characteristics of context. This context may come from a neighboring building, or from the typological and morphological conventions of the surrounding city. Context may also be interpreted without fixed geographical borders: it can be inspired by books and by travels. These inspirations can all be determined and circumscribed. Functionality, meaning the effective spatial and material translation of a program, is a category of judgment related to technical quality. They both have to do with levels of craftsmanship, which is also the case when the theme of durability enters the scene. In the end, a design appears as an order, with a variety of gradations in coherence. Does the design, or the building, show that the whole and parts of the concept are integrated in a convincing way? Does it really deliver what can be considered to be the basic contribution of design to research, namely that it shows and identifies realities that are imperceptible to the naked eye?

Admittedly, in the end, judging the quality of an architectural design at universities (as in critical publications) always has a strong subjective impulse. This subjectivity may be brought to a climax when the evaluation also includes a reflection on the stylistic characteristic, which more than anything else tends to provoke immediate approval or disapproval. Judgment depends on clear expression, but most of all on successful convincing. Convincing means that the argument is transferred with success, so that it gains common ground among students and audience. There is no reason why a round table of peer experts would not be able to judge a design in reasonable terms, using parameters like technical originality, methodological coherence and craftsmanship. Precisely because standards for a scientific based architecture need to be defined it is important that architecture schools invest their time in defining the position of design in their academic ambitions, and in particular, dare to experiment with combinations of research and design. The addition of a research component will certainly help to enforce the rationality of what the design proposes. Research by design, as it is commonly called, is not a dead horse, as some would say, but a topic with urgency, as it may help to revive a critical culture far outside academia.

Since 2005 and through the Department of the Built Environment at Eindhoven (TU/e), I have tried to rephrase the balance between design and research, to the advantage of the latter. Roughly three strategies can be distinguished within the range of possibilities for the interaction between research and design. The first has a very strong emphasis on research, turning the design into a derivative or an illustration, sometimes referred to as *evidence-based design*. The second also aims at design based in research, but here design adds a definite autonomy to the research: it has a life of its own. It includes what is understood as *analogous architecture*. In the third combination of research and design, both have dominant impulses, but their fusion inclines towards *free style*.

Examples from my graduation studios in Eindhoven [see p. 31, 33 & 35] show different approaches of using research in combination with design. What they share is a serious engagement with the issue of context as an influential genetic factor. They illustrate trust in the possibility of highlighting historical and actual context, in order to mobilize their relevance. Context is not always easy to handle: if it is interpreted as something immovable,it may degenerate into a dictate from which no escape is possible. Good design cannot do without free association. Understanding the possibilities of choice, between inertia on the one hand and a lively design culture on the other, should be a priority in the educational system of universities. Accepting that as a hopeful prospect within the walls of the institutions, an infectious continuation in the critical culture outside academia could follow. It is not, however, that the task of the academic and the critic are exactly the same (which is why the fate of the aforementioned colleague critic Joost Meuwissen will remain unresolved for the moment). The frameworks used for the evaluation of design will remain for stricter at universities, while the critic will rightfully maintain his freedom of speculation. But the shared basis for establishing qualities in reasonable terms, delivers a decisive argument for a sound friendship between the two: the academic researcher and the critic.

1 Arnon Grunberg, 'Freakshow', in: *VPRO Gids* (24, 2011), p. 9.
2 Joost Meuwissen 'Voordracht over architectuurkritiek' (1985), in *Architectuur als Oude Wetenschap* (Eindhoven: 1988), p. 246-252.
3 Meuwissen, p. 249.
4 *Quality assessment in the design and engineering disciplines. A systematic framework* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2010) p. 25.
5 See: Johan Swart and Kevin Claus, *Amsterdam Canal District – Locating and mapping attributes of Outstanding Universal Value*, (Eindhoven: Eindhoven University of Technology, 2012) unpublished thesis; & Swart et al. 'World Heritage cities : Amsterdam's canal district case study' in *HERITAGE 2012: Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Heritage and Sustainable Development* (Barcelos: Green Lines Institute, 2012) pp.175-186.
6 Kevin Claus, *Amsterdam Fashion Hotel: Critical redevelopment of a large scale building in the Amsterdam canal district as case study*, (Eindhoven: Eindhoven University of Technology, 2012) unpublished thesis.
7 Martijn Schlatmann, *Delirious Amsterdam*, (Eindhoven: Eindhoven University of Technology, 2010) unpublished thesis.
8 Jaap Evert Abrahamse, *De grote uitleg van Amsterdam: stadsontwikkeling in de zeventiende eeuw* (Bussum, 2010).
9 Ryanne Janssen, *Een Barokke Bricolage*, (Eindhoven: Eindhoven University of Technology, 2013) unpublished thesis.

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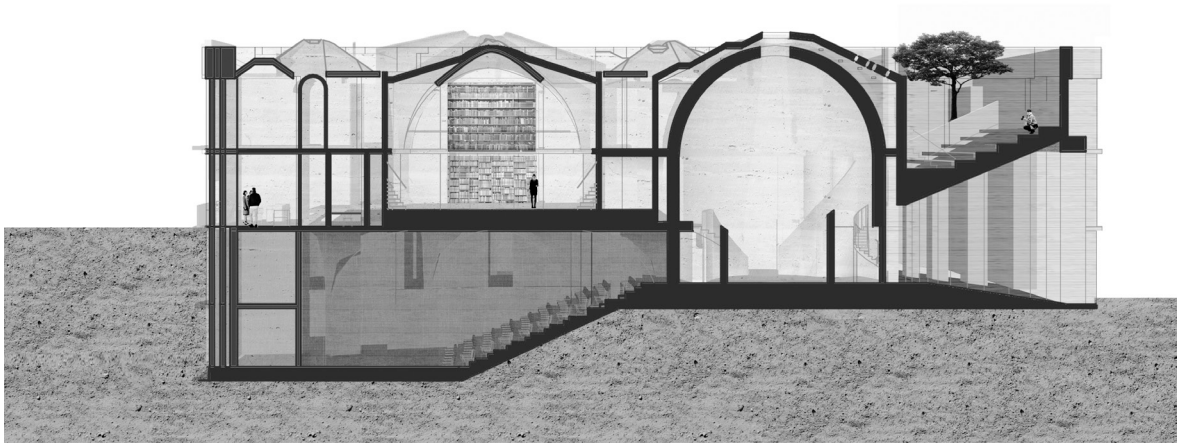
FREE DESIGN

This project is one of the outcomes of a studio that took Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* as a starting point.[9] The question raised was if an explicit system might be discovered in the richness of associations and cases made in this small book. The contents of the book were elaborated into a scheme that distinguished a complete 'tree' of grammatical features, available for design. One of the features of the scheme was the so-called 'vestigial element'. The vestigial element is a specific component of a building intentionally meant to refer to another reality or historical period: it is an element that is chosen by the designer to be integrated in a building in order to heighten the richness of meaning. Examples are the 'spolia' that were part of the extended building history (taking 170 years) of St. Peter's Church in Rome.

After exploring several different tracts of research around vestigial elements, it was decided to combine the layered aspects in a suitable building assignment that would be able to bear this richness of meaning. A Dutch library and study center in Rome was chosen as program, and students were tasked with making an all-embracing reference to the Baroque of its urban context. Claiming that this design answers all of the details and premises of the research would not be maintainable. But that doesn't undermine the relevance of the intense interaction between what is investigated and what is drawn. The research is functional here as a kind of a melting pot, out if which the design starts to produce itself almost automatically.



Building section by Ryanne Janssen, 2013.

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