

Interior Design Criticism: Between Excess and Austerity

Dr Jill Franz, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

Abstract: *In this paper, an analysis of a review article in an Australian design magazine is undertaken using a selected model of architectural criticism. While the model is found to be restrictive in facilitating exploration of fundamental philosophical issues in interior design, it does reveal the potential of interior design criticism as a ground for further developing and defining interior design's distinctive qualities and possibilities. The paper shows that a special aspect of the critical ground is its ability to accommodate oppositional concepts and through the tension in their proximity to provide for more constructive debate and exploration.*

Keywords: *Interior Design; Architecture; criticism*

Introduction

What is valued in interior design today? What are the ideals that contemporary interior design practice purports to uphold through the environments that are produced in its name? What constitutes 'good' interior design? What is the knowledge that qualifies interior design as a discipline? These are the types of questions that I struggle with as I teach and practice interior design. This paper is an attempt to respond to these questions more explicitly. As outlined in the paper, I approach this from the position of design criticism; or more precisely, through a critique of design criticism. The critique draws on personal experience of undertaking a review of the GPO Hotel, in Brisbane, for *Artichoke* magazine. It will examine this process in terms of the nature of design criticism, the position it occupies 'between excess and austerity', and the potential of occupying this liminal position in gaining a better understanding of the nature of interior design. It represents an initial, work-in-progress stage in an ongoing process of discovery and consolidation. Specifically, it involves the application and evaluation of the model of architectural criticism described by Attoe (1978).

The role of criticism in (interior) design

The formal activity of criticism has played a significant role in art and literary areas, and, through these areas, in society. In his book, *The Function of Criticism*, Eagleton (1984) described how in eighteenth century England, the modern concept of literary criticism was closely tied, through its provision of a public voice and a forum for debate, to the emancipation of middle class society (p. 10). He also highlighted how literary criticism contributed in varying ways to the development of diverse fields such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, film studies, and cultural theory (p. 123). In terms of art criticism, this too

has a long and rich history contributing not in the least to our understanding of aesthetics and beauty. In turn, studies of these phenomena have informed or been the impetus for development of certain areas of philosophy such as those relating to judgement and ethics; an example being the work of Kant as conveyed in his 1952 seminal text: *The Critique of Judgement*.

By comparison, the tradition of critique in architecture has not been very productive or constructive. As Attoe stated in 1978, architectural critics '...have made few identifiable contributions to our understanding of the environment and, more importantly, to improving it' (p. xi). Unfortunately, twenty-five years later this still appears to be the case despite the continuing significance of architecture, the role of critique in design teaching, and the increasing prominence of allied design disciplines such as interior design. In fact, searches of literature give no indication of a concerted effort to explore the possibility of developing a discipline of interior design criticism distinct from that of architecture. The term 'discipline' is used here in the sense of an explicit body of knowledge incorporating philosophical, theoretical and procedural frameworks for informing criticism and the criticism of criticism within a specific area that has its own distinctive substantive and procedural application.

The absence of and the need for a discipline of interior design criticism recently became apparent when I was asked to review the renovation and refurbishment of the original Fortitude Valley Post Office, which I approached without any overt understanding of the nature of design criticism, its role and various frameworks. To undertake the review I relied on my own values in relation to design and a tacit understanding of the purpose of critique influenced somewhat by my interpretation of the expectations of the magazine; the latter judged solely on the tenor of articles appearing in past issues. While analysing other articles I became very aware of how they reflected, through opinions expressed by the authors as well as descriptions of the environments, underlying assumptions about the nature of interior design and its value in today's society. At the same time, it also occurred to me that interior design criticism has the potential to play a vital role in developing a general ethos of interior design.

The act of criticism provides a ground in between what has been created and what will be created. According to Attoe (1978), 'criticism will always be more useful when it informs the future than when it scores the past' (p. xii). The key to this, he suggested, is in breaking down the negative and oppositional perception normally attributed to criticism. Integral to this is conceiving criticism as behaviour that facilitates understanding rather than as judgement that finds faults and invites defensiveness (Attoe, 1978, p. 2). This same sentiment is expressed

by Barthes (1987) who held that: ‘...true ‘criticism’ of institutions and languages does not consist in ‘judging’ them, but in perceiving, in separating, in dividing’ (p. 33). Barthes’ reference to ‘dividing’ is used in the sense of the Greek understanding of criticism ‘krinein’ which means to separate, to sift, to make distinctions (Attoe, 1978, p. 4). Having said this, Barthes recognised the constraints as well as the possibilities of critiquing another’s work. ‘The critic cannot claim to ‘translate’ the work, and particularly not to make it clearer, for nothing is clearer than the work. What the critic can do is to ‘engender’ a certain meaning by deriving it from the form, which is the work.... The critic separates meanings, he [sic] causes a second language – that is to say a coherence of signs – to float above the first language of the work’ (Barthes, 1987, p. 80). Barthes advised that the critic should not bring the work down to pure explicitness (austerity) since at this point there is nothing more to say about it (p. 87). ‘...to wish to diminish the symbol is just as excessive as refusing to see anything other than the strict letter’ (Barthes, 1987, pp. 88-89).

Criticism of the criticism: Between excess and austerity

To view criticism broadly, Attoe (1987) applied the precedents provided by art and literary criticism; precedents which I use for the analysis described in this paper. While the application of frameworks outside the discipline of interior design provides a vehicle for better understanding the general nature and potential of design criticism, it also highlights deficiencies which, in turn, lends support for the view that interior design does in fact have a specific and distinctive role to play in providing for meaningful experience through the built environment. What is also revealed is the potential of interior design criticism to provide a platform for further understanding and developing discipline-specific knowledge.

The context of the review

As mentioned previously, the review analysed in this paper is of the refurbishment and extension of an historic post office (Figure 1) for use as a hotel incorporating a restaurant, bars, gaming room, wine cellar, function room and private lounges.

The review was commissioned by *Artichoke*, a quarterly Australian national magazine covering several areas of design including interiors, products, graphics, furniture, textiles and exhibitions. The magazine has just undergone a substantial change to its format to enable it to compete on a commercial basis with other established national and international design and architecture magazines. Its aim is to appeal to the general public, specifically people with a specific interest in design, as well as to design practitioners, educators and students. In its forward, the magazine presents itself as providing focussed comment about the practice and outcomes of design highlighting that it ‘...has design at its core and presents expert,



*Figure 1: External view of main section of the refurbished post office
(Photography: Author)*

informed opinion and commentary on all of design's diverse aspects – by designers who are practitioners, educators and observers' (Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 10).

The role of the critic

The magazine presents the commentator as a reviewer. However, the role is much more that of a critic because it involves 'the studied evaluation over time of an artistic effort' (Titchener, 1998, p. 2). It is not, as Titchener (1998) noted with most newspaper reviews of plays or other performances, an overnight reaction. From my own experience, I found that the magazine's use of the term 'review' caused confusion and uncertainty about the role I was to adopt. In many ways, it prevented me from exploring how I as a critic and designer was positioned within the culture, how I was being used, and how my critique work would be used (Merod, 1987, p. 19). In other words, the magazine's use of the term 'review' complied to restrict opportunities to perceive wider possibilities and to contribute to the discipline in a more focussed way; a situation contradictory to its stated mission. Having said this, it is recognised that the vehicle for the commentary is a magazine not an academic journal and that the editors are walking a fine line between the excessive license of popular press and what is perceived in comparison as the austere contrivance of academic writing. Also, it should be recognised that these magazines provide a great opportunity and very accessible ground for collective critical examination of the field of interior design. Apart from this IDEA journal, there are no other academic Australian interior design journals and very

few international interior design journals. In addition, it should be remembered that design magazines reach a wide section of the public providing an excellent opportunity for achieving a broader appreciation of the nature and role of interior design and a more inclusive and collaborative environment for its development.

Realising the position of critic rather than reviewer would have made me more conscious of the need to explore my inherent biases and preconceptions of this role (Attoe, 1987, p. 4). 'Once the bias in a critic's assessment or position is recognized, those who are the objects of criticism are freed of the burden of Final Judgment and drop defences and learn from the frank encounter with the other whose life has been touched' (Attoe, 1987, p. 8). To help understand the various roles of critic, Attoe (1987) identified some of the metaphors used by other critics. He described R. P. Blackmur's metaphor of the literary critic as a kind of magical surgeon who operates without ever cutting living tissue (p. 6) and Ezra Pound's understanding of a critic as a patient man showing a friend through his library (p. 7). From the dramatic arts, he referred to Charles Marowitz's metaphors of critic as diarist, tourist, sit-down comic, fastest gun in the west end, to mention but a few (p. 7). With respect to architecture, he noted an obvious absence of stated metaphors suggesting as possibilities: missionary, proselytizer of good taste and steward of the environment (p. 7).

In analysing my position as critic for the article described in this paper, it occurred to me that it is possible for a critic to adopt several roles and engage several metaphors in the one article. For instance, there are instances in the article that reflect the value I place on cultural heritage such as the emphasis given in the introduction to describing the architectural character of the building and highlighting its significance to the people in the community when it operated as a post office. Specific mention is also made of the fact that it is heritage listed and that this presents a certain type of challenge and responsibility to the designer. There is also direct criticism of the designer's failure to use local materials and products; the impact of which is somewhat diluted by, in the same sentence, praising him for addressing the local climate and lifestyle culture. Another role I adopt in undertaking the criticism is that of narrator concerned with articulating the experience of the environment. This focus on experience reflects the view that people connect with environments in various ways not in least being at an emotive, dynamically interactive level.

Forms of criticism

Integrally tied to the role of the critic is the purpose of the criticism. Incorporating taxonomies from other areas of criticism, Attoe (1987) identified three general purposes of architectural criticism: normative, interpretive, and descriptive (p. 9). Normative criticism is characterised by

its recourse to something outside the environment in question such as a doctrine, a system or a measure. As noted by Attoe (1987), architecture is well represented by statements that stipulate an ethos for design – that form should follow function being one of numerous well-established truisms. For a critic, conforming to this doctrine is problematic in the context of the reuse of an existing type of building for another purpose. Given that a significant degree of interior designing occurs independent of the architectural fabric the application of this doctrine has to be limited to the interior environment alone, in the process weakening the extent to which the designer can feel moral and absolved from having to adhere to specific requirements. For many designers, it is easier to adopt the utilitarian doctrine of ‘progress at any rate’. At the other end of the continuum is the preservationist/conservationist doctrine, which is more prevalent in the case of historic buildings (Attoe, 1987, p. 14). As noted previously, the focus in my criticism was very much in favour of maintaining the architectural quality and cultural value of the post office. This is also conveyed in the article through mention of how the designer has reinforced the building’s architectural quality via references in the furniture to Victorian Italianate detailing (Figure 2). Implicit in this is acceptance of another doctrine relating to the production of form that is appropriate for the material and vice versa.



*Figure 2: Historic reference in furniture detailing
(Photography: Author)*

In order to better acknowledge the complexities of human interaction, Attoe (1987) also referred to criticism's recourse to a system of principles such as Vitruvius's *Firmitas, Utilitas and Venustas* (p. 21). As to whether these were intended to be principles has been questioned by Capon (1999) who suggested that it is possibly more accurate to talk of Vitruvius's emphasis on order, arrangement, eurhythmy, symmetry, propriety and economy as principles (p. 9). In the article under scrutiny, there is an obvious endorsement of what is perceived to be the designer's attempt to manage and organise the elements of the environment in terms of firmness, commodity and delight through the use of order, arrangement and so on. '...the [ground floor bar] space is now punctuated by several unashamedly large pendent lights that hang over and give definition to the central rectilinear chocolate coloured marble bar' (Franz, 2002, p. 26). Figure 3 is a photograph of this area. The article also notes how the over-scaled light fittings and commissioned artworks by David Band '...enhance the volume of the space, giving it a quality that invites interaction and exploration' (p. 26).



*Figure 3: Formalist features of the space
(Photography: Author)*

With respect to a systems approach associated with the normative categories of criticism, there is also a typical form of criticism that attributes consistency to human behaviour demanding a consistent approach in how we design the built environment (Attoe, 1987, p. 34). In terms of the article, there is strong inference of the suitability of the post office to its new use as a hotel and of the new use to the post office. This notion of fit demands further investigation in interior design and interior design criticism.

The second major purpose of architectural design criticism as noted by Attoe (1987) is interpretive. With this purpose in mind, the critic attempts to place the reader in the critic's position as someone having experienced the environment. This can be achieved in an advocacy way by giving the reader a new perspective on the environment; or in an evocative way by evoking in the reader feelings similar to those experienced; or in an impressionistic way by using the environment to create a work that has value in itself (Attoe, 1987, p. 49-83). As mentioned previously, the main approach in writing the article was for the reader to get some feeling for the environment; to experience the environment in a surrogate way. To do this end, I used very emotive language and focussed on elements of the environment that are implicitly rich and provocative and that by association produce specific emotive responses. 'Scarlet red light spilling from the interior through window and door openings creates the impression of a place that is raw, pulsating, provocative, yet at the same time inviting and reassuring' (Franz, 2002, p. 26). While all the elements are used extensively by the designer special mention was given to his use of colour, form and texture in furnishings, finishes and furniture as illustrated in Figure 4. In addition, I wrote and structured the article from the viewpoint of someone walking or driving past or entering and moving through the various rooms in the buildings.



*Figure 4: Focus on inherently evocative form, colour and texture
(Photography: Author)*

As is the case here, specific use was made of photographs in the article to support the visualisation and experience of the hotel. This was achieved through consultation with the photographer, in the early stages providing him with the text of the article and an outline of what I was trying to achieve. As well as being descriptive, the photographs are also evocative and impressionistic in their content and presentation.

It has been made apparent to me through this experience how interior design more than architecture lends itself to interpretive criticism particularly its evocative and impressionistic forms; and that, subsequently, herein lies a vehicle for further exploring this aspect of the discipline, including the notion of designed form as art. Underlying this statement is the view that, as currently practiced, there is a distinction, albeit at times quite fuzzy, between interior design and architecture but that this distinction is not as explicitly recognised in interior design's body of knowledge as it could (or perhaps, should) be. The situation for interior designers at the moment is '...an unfinished project of self-definition' (Spector, 2001, p. 26).

The third general purpose of architectural criticism as noted by Attoe (1987) is descriptive criticism. A descriptive approach is characterised by its focus on explication through either the depiction of static or dynamic aspects of the environment, or biographical details about the designer and/or client, or contextual descriptions that reveal social, political, economic, environmental constraints/opportunities experienced by the designer and/or client (Attoe, 1987, pp. 85–106). In terms of the critique of the hotel, the emphasis for the most part was on the activities accommodated by the various spaces. As such, this was a missed opportunity to comment on the ability of the environment to support or not support certain social practices as explained, for example, through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model (Attoe, 1987, p. 96) or through Pierre Bourdieu's work with *habitus*, which presents, among other things, the built environment as a social agent (Stillar, 1998, p. 95). As outlined previously, however, an attempt was made in the criticism to consider socio-cultural, environmental and political contextual factors. While, for the most part, these could be viewed as constraints, it was apparent, given the extremely high quality of the finishes and the accommodation of the unusual request to design the building so that a motor vehicle could to be hoisted into the second floor function room, that economic factors provided opportunities rather than constraints.

An analysis of the criticism using Attoe's criteria highlights the use of several rhetorical devices including: dualism, where the experience of the environment is described as both evocative and inviting; juxtaposition, through the use of paradoxical statements and the positioning of photographs in relation to the text; exaggeration, in the form of emotive language and in the use of full-page colour photographs some of which have been electronically manipulated;

and intensification involving a verbal focus on specific aspects of the environment, as well as the cropping of photographs to direct attention to a specific visual element of the interior. What could have been considered is a greater use of metaphors and perhaps even personification where the environment is given a voice; being careful in the process to balance the benefits of being colourful and excessive with the risks of manipulating the information to the extent that it is overly exaggerated and austere in meaning (Attoe, 1987, p. 109).

Overall, the analysis of the criticism reveals a general approach noted by Attoe (1987) whereby, through description, the critic attempts to have the reader see what they see, experience what they experience; to proceed from this basis to the interpretation of what is seen and experienced; and from here to make a judgement of the design (p. 85). In the case of the hotel, the judgement was that the designer, for the most part, had produced what equated to 'good' design. But why was there this presumption that a summing up of the environment's worth was needed? In responding to this, Spector (2001) advocated the use of 'thick' rather than 'thin' concepts in architectural critique. Thick concepts employing emotive, perhaps even excessive, language '...allows the reader to get inside the interpretation itself and play with the point of view being offered up' (Spector, 2001, p. 120). This compares with thin concepts that provide for an austere and diluted understanding of ethics through their recourse to universal principals and a position of privilege outside the interpretation of the work (Spector, 2001, p. 120).

Conclusion

The application of Attoe's model of architectural criticism presented in this paper reveals its usefulness in providing a basic framework for exploring underlying values and assumptions in interior design. As noted, the inclusion of interpretive and descriptive dimensions is particularly appropriate and with further development could be influential in better understanding the distinctive quality of interior design. On a deeper more philosophical level, however, the model has serious limitations. Further research is planned to investigate how various critical theories such as teleology, deontology, virtue theory and contract theory (Wasserman et al, 2000), for example, can be used in conjunction with Attoe's model to provide a more enduring and fundamental basis for addressing the questions identified in the introduction and final section of this paper. Overall, the paper confirms the value of criticism in providing an effective ground on which traditionally perceived oppositional structures like excess and austerity come together and through their tension produce a richer understanding of the nature and value of design.

'Criticism is an imaginative art that has a spiritual and visionary dimension that helps to defeat the chaos of the time' (Hart, 1994, p. 246).

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