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ENVS 2034 History and Theory

Building Review Assignment

The Peckham Library

11/2007

Peckham Library is a library and community building situated in Peckham in south-east London. It was designed by Alsop and Störmer (now Alsop Architects) and won the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2000. This essay will compare and contrast 3 critiques (texts) of the library that are in different styles and from different times and perspectives. The aim being to distinguish between and define different types of criticism and evaluate them.

Text one is 'Tales of the unexpected' from *Building* written by Martin Spring. The text was written just as the building was being finished and thus is very exploratory in the fact that it gives the reader a complete walkthrough of the building describing shapes, colours and textures. Spring has written for *Building* for many years which is a specialised construction publication that is mainly read by construction and architecture professionals. The writing then tends towards a reader who is knowable on architecture and detailed material use. Spring clearly has a good understanding of architecture with phrases such as "curtain wall" and the architectural theories discussed for example: what is modernism/neo-modernism? and what makes good architecture and bad? However Spring doesn't ask many hard questions; was this option the most cost effective? Would the money have been better spent elsewhere? Is it helping the re-generation of the area?

As a whole, for an article in a construction publication such as *Building* it lacks that detailed assessment of structure shape that only begins to be explored towards the end of the article with some drawings.

Emotional reactions are often attributed to the building itself "heady mix", "unwary visitors" and "unnerving" for example. The text gives the impression that "architectural delights and surprise" would draw in users and keep them happy, but fails to mention the idea that this may be over

complicating and distracting for anyone to work in. However the idea that users may be hesitant to travel up several floors just to get to the library is mentioned. Spring seems to be awestruck with the overall “joy” of the design and unable to address serious potential flaws. Christophe Egret a project director is quoted as saying “we raised the library hall 12m above ground so it doesn’t feel like a weight above your head” which is true if you’re inside, but not if you’re outside! Spring fails to pick up on this and other external factors.

The second text I will look at is by David Littlefield titled ‘Still got it?’ from the *RIBA Journal* and written in 2002, more than 2 years after the library had opened. The article’s title automatically tells you that this article is going to question the building to a degree. The fact that a building wouldn’t *have it* after only 2 years is hard for some to understand. However like the previous text it’s written for the creative professionals and coincides with the 2002 Stirling Prize which the library won back in 2000. Unlike Spring, Littlefield (an architecture journalist and author) dives straight into the problems. Littlefield doesn’t really address the sense of the building only the complaints and counter arguments between the council and architects. The practical issues are in great contrast to the emotional response of Spring. Some practical issues I’m sure could not have been predicated however, from Spring little attempt was made to do so. Littlefield looks at the ethos of the owner rather than the ethos of the architect.

The Stirling prize often has controversial winners so it is not unusual for a journalist to comment on whether the previous winners have “still got it”. However Littlefield understands it’s a winner architecturally but not perfect in every way with public and staff. Littlefield gives the impression that the architect and librarians relations have decayed over time, initially enthusiastic with the project, 2 years on they are frustrated. Also aren’t fixing heating/graffiti/storage problems.

The final text written by Sophie Chadwick titled 'Struck by groovy building syndrome' was featured in *Times Arts Online* in 2002. The article is in major contrast to the others as it's in a mainstream online paper. Chadwick is less experienced in architecture writing compared to Littlefield and Spring and approaches Will Alsop the person rather than Peckham Library specifically. Her style of writing is very bold, chatty a flow of conciseness, unlike the previous thought out texts. The impression of Alsop is similar to how he was portrayed in the previous texts however he is humanised "I've been to Valencia. Bloody good time." Chadwick's describes the library as "drunk" which lacks much architectural meaning compared to Spring's "...Perched 4 storeys above an empty void...". However Chadwick does approach something the other writers didn't. She looked at the "groovy" philosophy of Alsop, albeit approached from a superficial point of view. The idea of "discovering architecture not designing it" Looking at a new project he was about to work on in Barnsley, she continues her casual "jam" with Alsop, he explains his untypical methodology of engaging people and getting them to enjoy the process as well as the product, which we assume he did in Peckham. She does take a closer look at Alsop and when noting he is anti-establishment, painting him very much as a renegade architect she points out his leading of the independent Architecture Foundation, a potentially contradictory position, Alsop denies it's the same thing. Chadwick influenced possibly by Alsop has a strong distaste for current British modern architecture poking fun at the lack of imagination and exploration compared to in Marseilles where they embraced "Maison Smurf", but none of that "foreign muck" comes to the UK.

Both Spring and Chadwick refer to Alsop as the British architecture world's L'enfant terrible, for his frank bucking of his successful contemporaries. But Chadwick uses the phrase to bolster the renegade image she has repeatedly portrayed, where as Spring uses it to further define the architecture. This shows again Spring greater understanding of architecture in contrast to Chadwick.

Chadwick's article will have reached a large number of people being mainstream press and will have disseminated a pretty one sided look at the Library 2 years on, not noting any of the failings as Littlefield does. Chadwick also fails to note the improvement to the area, she notes it has "buzzed" but doesn't mention its intent to bring out and in to the library the 10 year old inside us all as Spring reports.

To conclude I think that all 3 texts approach the building from a different angle, the first text is an excited puff piece the second a attempt to take the building down a notch pointing out its failing, yet in some ways showing it has been a success for its primary use and the third text explores the man behind the building, for the general public. The 3 critique in different ways; the first looking closely at the architecture details, shapes and spaces; the second looks into the social consequences of the build; the third explores the Alsop ideology and dismisses other modern British architecture.

“If you don’t try you can’t get criticised” – Dot Westcott, Librarian.

Bibliography

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