

Blair Kamin thinks all good journalistic critics are activists.

Text Katya Tylevich
Photo Nancy Stone

In a blog post this past August, *Chicago Tribune* architecture critic Blair Kamin told architects 'who've been on the receiving end of my critical volleys' to hold their rejoicing: he hasn't been fired, and he's not dead; he just won't be writing for the paper while he's on a year-long Nieman journalism fellowship at Harvard University.

Kamin, who's held his post at the *Tribune* since 1992 and who won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 1999, jokes that angry architects are an 'occupational hazard'. He's careful to point out that while his objective is not just to complain about bad architecture and city planning, he refuses to take part in something he calls 'criticism by omission' by simply highlighting the good. In the process, he's successfully taken on not just architects but politicians, developers and the almighty Donald Trump.

Kamin and I talk, surrounded by a panoramic view of Chicago from the 24th floor of the iconic Tribune Tower. He loves this city but says it will be exciting to discover Boston and to reimmerse himself 'in the world of ideas'. Kamin especially looks forward to having the time to read more books and magazines and to engage in the 'sheer pleasure' of looking at art just to sharpen the eye and mind, and not necessarily to report on it – though there's never a shortage of things to say. Even in his collections, *Why Architecture Matters: Lessons from Chicago* (2001) and *Terror and Wonder: Architecture in a Tumultuous Age* (2010), Kamin strikes up new conversations – with himself as much as the reader – by way of surprising postscripts and thoughtful introductions. Neither architecture nor its criticism is frozen in time, he tells me. Kamin finds Frank Lloyd Wright's comment about buildings being 'paths of discovery' just as applicable to essays about buildings. As Kamin prepares for his own, more literal, journey, he reflects on the paths architecture criticism has taken in the past

two decades and considers both the potholes and the express lanes.

You call yourself an 'activist critic'. Why make that distinction from a standard 'architecture critic'?

Whether they call themselves activists or not, all good journalistic critics are responsible for linking the public with the public realm and for analysing, before it's too late, projects that can help or harm a city. But there are publications today that only engage in 'criticism by omission'; they don't publish what they don't like. It's fine to pick out exemplary projects to set standards, but the result is a *Playboy* pictorial that doesn't show the reality of the built environment. Of course, activist critics don't just bemoan the bad – it's crucial that they also champion the good. The difference is that they look at everything.

I also make the distinction to bring the focus back to the critic as watchdog – someone who protects the public, not someone who writes about celebrity designers. I think some of the lamentation about the so-called 'death of criticism' can be attributed to the focus on starchitecture: glitzy buildings, flash as opposed to substance, and objects as opposed to the environment. The trap of the starchitect era is that 'a Zaha' begins to sound like 'a Ralph Lauren', and that's why it's so important for critics to rip the designer label off a building and judge the architecture, not the architect. Ultimately, the critic should be a Greek chorus, writing at some distance from the action, dispassionately laying out the truth that the participants might not want to own up to.

Who are the critics you read?

I read Paul Goldberger [architecture critic for *Vanity Fair*], who was my teacher at Yale. I read Ada Louise Huxtable. I read Michael Kimmelman of *The New York Times*. ▶



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record, there won't be anything for them to see about what the *Times* critic had to say about Frank Gehry's Eisenhower Memorial or the Ground Zero Memorial. I consider that a regrettable gap. But the fact that fewer newspapers have critics today is also symptomatic of a larger problem in American journalism, where everybody's a critic online.

Including you. Did you hesitate before starting your architecture blog, *Cityscapes*, in 2008?

Oh, absolutely. I like to think that my blog is still governed by the standards of journalism, but the problem is that to do well on the web you need to feed the monster, and if you're constantly feeding the monster you don't have time to look at your subjects in the most deliberate and in-depth ways possible. Fifteen years ago, if someone unveiled a proposal, I would see it, sleep on it, take a day to draft a response, and maybe see it in the paper three days later. The digital world is instantaneous, and I've had to make my writing more nimble in response.

But I think we've only just begun to mine the potential of the web. For now, the key is to not become a tool of this tool, cranking out stuff all the time, even if it's mindless. The question should always be: Does this subject have any lasting value, or is it simply an eye-catching, two-dimensional image meant to get a lot of clicks? Where's the substance? I'm often torn between posting on my blog to maintain lively dialogue and trying to focus on the long-term, important issues that an architecture critic has to focus on. I do find, though, that younger readers come upon my work by way of that blog. If I wasn't online, I would be a dinosaur. It's very important for criticism to be part of the public conversation, and public conversation is on the web now, not just in the newspaper.

A newspaper might run a few letters to the editor, but a blog allows users great levels of participation. Has that changed the critic's role?

In the world we live in now, critics are responsible as much for starting a conversation as for expressing the last word. People expect to interact with their journalists – they even expect to interact with their public sculptures. Online, I know right away whether people are disagreeing with me, because I have to approve their comments. For the most part, I let them have their say. Sometimes I respond and re-engage in either an argument or a dialogue. Sometimes people offer perspectives that you, as a critic, have missed, and the resulting interactions are extremely valuable.

One reason Jane Jacobs was so important was because she wasn't a trained architect or city planner, but rather a

Blair Kamin's Reading List

01

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

So wise (and influential) that its observations about the art of making vibrant cities are in danger of becoming clichés.

02

Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (1969)

This book offers deep insights into the aesthetic arc of American architecture and simultaneously makes it impossible (and irresponsible) to consider buildings in isolation from their physical and cultural contexts.

03

Lois Wille, *Forever Open, Clear, and Free: The Struggle for Chicago's Lakefront* (1972)

A colourful, richly documented, passionately written account of the battles that gave Chicago its greatest public space.

04

Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (1974)

Caro reveals that the real architects of our cities are not architects and that you shouldn't trust everything you read in *The New York Times*. (The paper of record was far too easy on Moses.)

05

William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980)

An eye-opening exploration of how parks and plazas really work, characterized by piercing intelligence and gentle humanism.

06

John Zukowsky, editor, *Chicago Architecture, 1872–1922: Birth of a Metropolis* (1987)

A splendid collection of essays that punctures the conventional wisdom that the first Chicago School of Architecture was a purely American phenomenon.

07

Ada Louise Huxtable, *Kicked a Building Lately?* (1989)

A brilliantly written, beautifully argued collection of columns that's full of zingers and has served as a model for other journalistic collections, mine included.

08

Robert Campbell and Peter Vanderwarker, *Cityscapes of Boston: An American City Through Time* (1992)

An incisive and expansive commentary that illuminates side-by-side photos of Boston past and present – and teaches lessons relevant to all American cities.

09

Allan Temko, *No Way to Build a Ballpark and Other Irreverent Essays on Architecture* (1993)

Another excellent collection of columns, in which the late *San Francisco Chronicle* critic articulates – and powerfully demonstrates – the virtues and value of 'activist criticism'.

very smart observer sitting on her stoop, seeing the reality that Le Corbusier or Daniel Burnham couldn't. I think there are really two great vantage points of a city. That of Jacobs: the mother figure sitting on the stoop, watching her children and observing very closely how the blocks work. And that of a Daniel Burnham: the master planner, the father figure standing on top of an office building in Chicago, looking out over the vast swath of the city and hurling thunder bolts, reimagining what his city might be. I don't think one vantage point is necessarily better than the other. For cities to work, you need both Burnham's grand design and Jacobs' humanistic and intimate observations.

On that subject, you've written that architecture is 'the inescapable art'. So why do you think it still has the reputation of being an esoteric art?

It's all Peter Eisenman's fault. [Laughs.] I'm kidding, but I do think the move toward discussing architecture as a kind of self-referential form of art, with a heavy emphasis on theory, began to permeate the field in the '70s. Many architectural journals still speak the dialect of 'archibabble', making the field's discussion seem hermetic and removed from everyday concerns. The real job of critics is to cut through all that malarkey – not to dumb down architecture but, ultimately, to democratize the art. And I don't mean to say that we should have referenda on architecture. I don't want to handcuff the creativity of great architects by making them try to appeal to mass taste. But I came of age as a critic at a time when the human toll of avant-garde architecture was there to see in full relief. Chicago

had erected public-housing projects like Cabrini-Green [constructed between the 1940s and 1960s and recently demolished] and Robert Taylor [constructed in 1962 and demolished in 2007]. These were traps – filing cabinets for poor people, designed without any input from those living in them. Housing projects like that represent a twisting of the architect's humanistic intent. So I have a deep sense of scepticism and a kind of Midwestern pragmatism when it comes to theory and ideology, because I've seen the human impact of it, and it wasn't pretty. Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor were experiments that went awry. Of course, as a critic, you can be sympathetic to the avant-garde and cutting-edge when they're leading in a good direction, but it's very important to challenge ideas that may have appeal within architectural culture but are designed with blind spots. The point is that you want to write about the politics of architecture, the human aspect of architecture, and the art of architecture to truly analyse works in all their complexity. And even then, no critic ever bats a thousand. You're not going to be right every time. Views change and buildings change.

I enjoy reading the extensive postscripts in your books. Sometimes it seems as if you use them to challenge your previous opinions.

I can't remember who said it, but there's a nice quote about how a building should ideally be reviewed three times: once when it's designed, once when it opens and once, say, five years down the road. I do believe buildings should be looked at through a continuum of time and not just the instant they open, and I don't think of my essays as frozen in time either. I find the question of changing tastes fascinating; one generation will see a building one way, another in an entirely different way, and different times and cultures want different things. For example, I'm sceptical of the current fashion that describes the pre-9/11 era as 'the decade of excess', as if everything built then was terrible. So all of a sudden Frank Gehry's Disney Hall was a terrible building? Give me a break. That's a masterpiece. In the same way, many of the great skyscrapers of the 1920s were demonized after the Depression. These were great buildings, and eventually people woke up and saw through the ridiculous ideology that they were decadent or riotous. So it's important for me to try and transcend changes in fashion and shifts in taste, and to focus on a building's quality and continuity over time. Often, on opening day, there's lots of enthusiasm, and it's hard to divine whether this is enduring architecture. But in order to push into the future, you have to think about how a building will perform over time, and in order to do that, you have to ask the rude questions that journalists have to ask of architects and their clients. <