

**WHEN DID ARCHITECTURE BECOME SO
DISCONNECTED FROM CULTURAL DISCOURSE?**

**SYDNEY SHILLING HOSTS A CRITICAL
CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW THE PROFESSION
NEEDS TO ENGAGE THE MAINSTREAM**



LANGUAGE BARRIER

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MOST OF MY FRIENDS (industry colleagues notwithstanding) could count the number of architects they know by name on one hand; a select few could name the designer of their favourite Toronto building without the help of Google. Musicians, directors, authors and other creatives are frequently name-dropped in casual conversation — but not architects. I've always wondered why. As a former architecture student, I often feel as though my access to architecture was earned through study. Granted, most kids haven't developed an obsession with Frank Lloyd Wright by the time they've hit middle school. Unlike arts and literature, architecture remains largely missing from the K-12 curriculum and, given the lack of accessible resources on the subject, the average person's engagement with the field is fairly surface-level — limited to home reno shows on HGTV. And while this content may offer an initial point of connection, it doesn't grapple with the pressing issues facing the built environment today.

The permanence of architecture, among many things, sets it apart from other issues in the popular consciousness. "Buildings tend to stand for a bit longer than a theatre performance. I can decide not to go to the theatre, I can decide not to listen to certain music, but once a building is built, it's there for everyone," says Reinier de Graaf, partner of Rotterdam firm OMA. Given that over half of the world's population now lives in urban centres and the average North American spends 90 per cent of their time indoors, people interact with the built environment as much as they do with music, movies or books, if not more. Many also care deeply about the way their city looks and functions. So why are people fluent in pop culture, while architecture remains a foreign language?

It wasn't always this way. At one point, architecture — and those responsible for creating it — were celebrated in the mainstream. The term "starchitect," coined

in the 1940s, describes this very phenomenon: practitioners whose influence not only catapulted them to canonic status within their industry but also made them bona fide celebrities in their own right. Eero Saarinen, for his part, made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1956. The Finnish American was a modernist icon whose work represented the progress, technology and optimism of the postwar period. In the decades that followed, seven more architects would grace *Time's* cover — including both lesser-known practitioners like Edward D. Stone and the legendary Le Corbusier, who was featured in a 10-page profile; Daniel Libeskind ended the streak in April 2005. These cover stories weren't just adulatory project reviews (though architecture features prominently in them). They were chronicles of the subject's life, both professional and personal, and often featured commentary from their contemporaries. The expansive feature on Le Corbusier in the May 1961 issue of *Time* painted a profoundly personal picture: "His moods are as unpredictable as his talent is unlimited. He can whisk off a sketch on something that seems little bigger than a postage stamp, and it will turn out to be almost exactly in scale. He has few close friends, and though he says he enjoys having people around to talk to, it is always a rather unilateral affair."

While it's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment that the starchitect fell from grace, the fact that an architect hasn't been featured on the cover since reflects the field's dwindling cultural relevance. Over the same period, print media have also seen a steady decline (*Time* magazine, which used to be published weekly, now runs only twice per month and with a much smaller circulation), and the effects of both trends have been far-reaching.

Architects' former status as cover stars — iconic yet knowable, their ideas accessible to the masses — stands in stark contrast to the seeming impenetrability of their contemporary counterparts. "Architects used to be concerned about the perception of their buildings, and frankly, I feel like they're not anymore. They don't actually know how to be public-facing. They have an idea of what the public wants, and it's completely divorced from reality," says Kate Wagner, architecture critic for *The Nation*. "I would argue that they're starting to be more engaged, but there is a sense of being above the public — which I think is bad because the public has to look at your building every day."

Yet firms' About Us pages read like a laundry list of laudable values their work aims to achieve: sustainability, livability, well-being and more. According to de Graaf, buzzwords like these are one of the key issues facing the field today. His new book, *architect, verb*, takes aim at these marketing terms, which he refers to as "the new language of building." He nearly broke the Internet when he admitted, in an article on *Dezeen*, that he didn't know what the term "placemaking" meant. "Maybe the dirty secret is that nobody knows what these words mean. And it's the first who admits it that then can trigger an avalanche," he says. If the partner of OMA himself is confused, how can we expect the average person to understand the terms architects use to describe their work?

Inspired by his experience on Zoom meetings during the pandemic, where verbal communication had to stand in for physical plans and models, the book unpacks the criteria on which architecture is now judged. By striving to achieve similar qualities, firms have created an architecture of sameness, he says, and overusing these terms has rendered them meaningless. The result is that it's become nearly impossible to hold practitioners accountable for their claims. If every studio purports to be world-class, for instance, then by definition, none of them can be. He admits that even OMA falls victim to using this language, which sometimes creeps into corporate communications and business development proposals. "If all I achieve is that whoever uses those words in the future feels slightly more shame than they did before, then I'm already very happy."

Marketing lingo often flattens architecture's many meanings. But the complex academic jargon that has long been a barrier to the industry's accessibility remains an entrenched problem. "As an undergrad at Princeton, I was exposed to a lot of theoretical nonsense," writer and PR professional Eva Hagberg told me. "The million-dollar

ARCHITECTS DON'T KNOW HOW TO BE PUBLIC-FACING

question is, why are architects encouraged in school to make no sense? It's a sickness in the academy — and I think it's in part due to a profound insecurity about what architects do because it is not culturally valued. And so, they're always down bad." Ultimately, it's learned behaviour: The traditional studio model teaches students to communicate their ideas to other architects, and they are often rewarded for parroting back their professors' poetic language. Rarely is there an opportunity to practise engaging with those outside the field.

On the flip side, I was frequently told as an architecture student that my drawings should communicate on my behalf, that they should be legible and easily understood with no explanation at all. While this may be perfectly valid advice for presenting to industry professionals, it wrongfully assumes that any layperson can read a floor plan — and insinuates that the labour of explaining one's work is somehow beneath architects. Hagberg refutes this idea in her recent book, *When Eero Met His Match*, which places anecdotes from her own career alongside the story of Aline Louchheim

Saarinen, wife of Eero Saarinen and one of the first documented marketing professionals in architecture. "One of the most truly pernicious and widely held beliefs by architects is that the building tells a story on its own, and my book was an attempt to argue historically and contemporaneously that buildings cannot speak for themselves, images cannot speak for themselves, and a picture is not worth a thousand words; a picture needs at least a couple hundred words to become legible in some way," she explains.

In an architectural culture that has historically rewarded opacity over clarity, in both design language and the written word, PR professionals (and the press in turn) have taken on the role of translator between architects and the public. Louchheim Saarinen, the mastermind behind Saarinen's success, pioneered the idea of the project narrative, conceiving brilliant metaphors that brought his buildings to life — like the iconic comparison of his TWA Terminal to a bird in flight. "Left to his own devices, Eero would say things like 'This building is about humanism and ideals of man,' which is meaningless to me. At one point, he got really sick of the bird analogy with TWA, but [Aline kept reminding him] it's a really smart image," says Hagberg.

While Louchheim Saarinen held tightly to the reins, for Hagberg, making architecture legible through writing is a deeply collaborative process that involves interviews with the designers, a thorough visual analysis of the project images and sometimes direct consultation with photographers. "I think architects fundamentally don't know what is interesting about a building and they are often very convinced that they do — and they will push that idea through," she says. It's her job to point out the details that will resonate with people other than industry professionals.

Since Louchheim Saarinen was practising, the media landscape has changed dramatically. Architecture criticism, both building reviews and larger discourse about the built environment, was once widely read in local newspapers, rather than confined to niche trade publications. It was a vital resource that helped decode even the most complex buildings for the public to understand. "The best reviews of buildings are not descriptive. When Herbert Muschamp first saw the Guggenheim

in Bilbao, by Frank Gehry, he was so wrapped up by the whole building that he described it as the free-flowing skirt of Marilyn Monroe,” says de Graaf. “And I think if that is the effect of a building, the review is as much a piece of creative writing, if not more so, than a reflection of the building. That’s what good architecture does.”

More recently, as publications have transitioned to the digital realm, in-house critics have become fewer and further between (a phenomenon that has also impacted the food and music industries), and the architectural media have become less, well, critical. The thoughtful interpretation of projects has, by and large, been replaced by corporate press releases proliferated on online platforms — which serve the business interests of firms, rather than educate the public. The institutions that shape mainstream culture now engage with architecture in a more limited way. In parallel, platforms like blogging, Substack and social media have democratized publishing, increasing the accessibility of content — and acting as a conduit into an industry cloaked in mystery.

Wagner is the ultimate success story for self-publishing in architecture. Her blog, *McMansion Hell*, went viral on Tumblr in 2016 for her annotated images poking fun at suburban American homes (she has since amassed over 100,000 followers on Twitter, or X). What began as a personal passion project wasn’t about trying to reach architects or even architecture lovers, she explains; she was just “posting into the void.” It became a source of comic relief and an informal educational resource: “I feel like I’m responsible for thousands of Tumblr teenagers knowing what a dormer is, which I consider a personal success,” she laughs. “The annotative approach is effective in giving people the terminology to look at buildings, and also encouraging them to notice the details.” She acknowledges that the financial — and creative — freedom that comes from being self-published has afforded her the ability to be irreverent in her writing.

And yet she’s carried this signature tone into her position at *The Nation* (she cites Charles Jencks and Ada Louise Huxtable as key references). Her unusual start writing about ordinary buildings, and for a general audience, has shaped her unique voice. “I didn’t invent anything — it’s just that the landscape has changed in a way that, when someone does something that other people were doing 50 years ago, it feels new within the context of the meme-ified social media space. It’s an adaptation of the times,” she says. Still, many architects and academics argue that the conversations that play out online, and especially on social media, don’t constitute true architectural discourse. “When it comes in my direction, it’s nakedly sexist. It’s also because I’m young and people don’t take young people seriously.”

A NEW GENERATION OF PUBLICATIONS IS MAKING ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE MORE INCLUSIVE — FOR BOTH THE INDUSTRY AND CURIOUS OUTSIDERS

A new generation of publications is leading the way toward inclusivity — capturing the attention of both the industry and curious outsiders. *The New York Review of Architecture*, which launched its inaugural issue in May 2019, is a prime example. Targeting a culturally curious audience (think readers of the *New Yorker* or *Pitchfork*), its approachable content takes a slant perspective, often covering topics that might not necessarily have an obvious connection to architecture or urbanism. One of its most recent issues, for instance, explores U.S. grocery chain Wegmans and the TV show *The Curse*. By connecting architecture to mainstream and consumer culture, which people are inevitably more invested in, it presupposes that you don’t necessarily even have to be interested in architecture to want to pick up a copy. “People care when things are being changed in their neighbourhood, or when a new building goes up and blocks their view or creates a big shadow across a part of the city. So we had this sense that there was an audience out there for smart, critical and sometimes funny writing about architecture, and we wanted to build a publication that would be able to find that audience. We saw a niche that wasn’t filled,” explains Marianela D’Aprile, *NYRA*’s deputy editor.

So, whose job is it to produce architectural culture anyway? Practitioners, PR professionals and the media all have a vital role — but they must work together and play to each other’s strengths. According to de Graaf, architects need to spend less time preaching and more time tackling the

real issues people care about: “Architects think they are meant to be saving the world, and I don’t think they can, at least no more than any other isolated professional group can save the world. If there is a metaphor appropriate for architecture at present, it’s the ostrich with its head in the sand.”

Many architects think that contextualizing their own work is (or should be) part of their scope, but Hagberg argues against this misconception: “It’s like how artists aren’t their own art historians or critics. An artist attempting to place their own work into contemporaneous or historical context is likely to be disastrous. Architects for some reason believe that they have both the expertise to produce the work, which is difficult on its own, and also represent and analyze it. Thankfully, they are wrong, which is why I have a day job.”

As an instructor (her side gig), Hagberg saw her students challenging the kind of writing that has historically been rewarded in academia. “When I taught in grad schools, I felt like my role was to be a provocateur. I assigned Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and my students ripped it apart — which was great, because it had been presented to me in grad school as a foundational amazing text, and 10 years later, people were like, *This makes no sense*. I tell my students that if they read something and it doesn’t make any sense, they should read it again and really try to think about it. And if it still doesn’t make sense — it’s not them, it’s the text.”

Architectural workers, too, can play a part in making discourse more accessible by holding their colleagues accountable for the language they use. “A sort of Socratic interrogation would be good,” says de Graaf. “The moment you don’t understand something, that is the moment to raise your hand and ask, *What do you mean?* If we just got over the fear of appearing dumb, we would collectively get a lot more intelligent.”

ARCHITECTS NEED TO SPEAK IN A LANGUAGE THAT WE ALL UNDERSTAND

Still, he owns the privilege that no one would dare call the partner of OMA dumb (at least, to his face). But what's the alternative to all this jargon? It's simpler than one might think: "Try to talk about a project as if you are explaining it to a well-meaning family member who is not an architect, but who is interested in and, in principle, positively disposed towards what you might be doing," he says.

Architects must also relearn how to connect with the media beyond the corporate press release, even if that means opening themselves up to risk. "Architects are so controlling over their self-image that they don't actually want the press to pay attention to them," says Hagberg. This aversion to the press is a symptom — not just of the media ecosystem but of the capitalist system within which buildings are designed. "Architects are not really seen as cultural figures because their position in the market makes it so that it's incredibly disadvantageous for them to say anything that is cutting-edge or relevant or challenging to the status quo," says D'Aprile. "If you're going to be a kind of cultural reference, you need to be able to say some of those things. But architects need power to be on their side, because they need money to make their buildings, and so it doesn't make sense for them to behave in ways that are required of public intellectuals." While de Graaf's musings on the state of architecture have been both commended and contested by his peers, they have been a springboard for debate and conversation.

Events can also play a key role in opening up the discourse and introducing architecture to new audiences. "Architects give talks at schools that are closed off to the public; maybe the public can go to those talks, but they are not publicized for the public. It's not prohibited, but they're also not invited," says Wagner. This is where events like the Chicago Architecture Biennial and the Venice

Biennale are important. Though criticized for its most recent edition, which invoked the theme of rehearsal to demonstrate the city as a work in process, the former offered a free and accessible look at the built environment, partnering with local organizations to ensure each project had a long-lasting community impact. In contrast, the latter is rife with dense academic language

and abstract architectural concepts, which can feel elitist to outsiders but also bridges architecture to art and culture. "These events serve as anchors to the smaller pieces of the discourse that float around them," says D'Aprile.

Arguably, the most important thing that architects can do to engage the public is to design buildings that benefit their communities — and speak to their larger civic values. This is easier said than done; we also have to acknowledge the politics of how projects get built. "There's a general cultural assumption that smaller firms are the ones able to do that kind of deep engagement. What turned out to be the truth is that big firms that have a lot of resources behind them are basically able to subsidize affordable housing projects with larger luxury projects," says D'Aprile. "That's not sexy, and it doesn't necessarily create a coherent and singular PR narrative."

For the past few years, it has seemed that the industry's priorities are starting to shift, as Lacaton & Vassal and Francis Kéré secured back-to-back Pritzker wins for their community-focused work. "The architects I'm interested in are the ones that actually do things, solve problems, work in their communities; they aren't flashy," says Wagner. The architecture media, for their part, should continue to highlight these types of projects — and not shy away from criticism where it's warranted. "It seems like there's a market for it. My friends and I all want to read the same thing that doesn't exist," says Hagberg.

But beyond producing quality content that relates to a diverse audience, publishers must also make that content accessible to that audience — a losing battle in a world where paywalls are all but necessary to keep media organizations afloat. And while social media platforms have the potential to contribute to meaningful discourse, they're not a catch-all solution for building a more inclusive design culture: "Social media is a giant performance. I think the value of a really good, smart, thorough article written by a really good writer is worth so much more," says Hagberg.

The issue of public engagement is bigger than the media, and too complex for any one firm to address. Ultimately, we need architects to speak in a language the public can understand — and a cultural ecosystem that creates more transparency behind the process of how things get built.

"People, in some ways, feel disenfranchised from their built environments — like they're controlled by somebody else who doesn't have their own interests in mind. Which is probably true. They feel like they don't have avenues to intervene in those processes, or even develop their own thoughts about those processes," D'Aprile says. "Something that I get asked often is, *Is this building good?* And what that question tells me is that the person asking might have an opinion about it, but they don't have the apparatus that allows them to trust that opinion."

Perhaps the problem is not that people need an apparatus to access architecture but that they have been convinced that they do. An anecdote from an old professor has fundamentally shaped the way I think about architecture: When visiting the Royal Ontario Museum, he asked a janitor what he thought about the new crystal addition, designed by Daniel Libeskind. He hated it, not aesthetically but because the baseboards don't sit at a 90-degree angle and were impossible to clean. It taught me two things: First, that the measure of good architecture is not just the way it looks but how it functions. And secondly, that anyone who has experienced a building is entitled to an opinion on it — and can offer important insights that might otherwise be missed by industry professionals. Intuitively, we know what good and bad architecture feels like. Anyone can identify a bottleneck in a department store, even if they're not familiar with the term "circulation," or admire the imposing beauty of a concrete building without knowing its roots in the brutalist movement. If you've made an honest effort to understand a building and still don't get it, maybe that's a fault of the building and not the user.

Of the structural barriers that limit engagement, the largest by far is that architects need to genuinely seek out meaningful connections with the communities they serve. "Public engagement has become a term like 'sustainability,' like 'place-making,' that at best is lip service and almost an antonym of what it claims to be," says de Graaf. "I have a theory that all of these words and ideologies find their origin in their own impossibility; it's a kind of virtue signaling. The answer to the problem of public engagement is to engage with the public." What constitutes good architecture in 2024? Ask a janitor, not an architect. **AZ**