

Architecture is too important to leave to the architects

A conversation with Giancarlo De Carlo by Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn



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Giancarlo de Carlo has a long career as an architect and writer behind him. As an architect he has been self-taught, having mastered the profession during the war while at the same time being involved in the resistance. In those days he was an enthusiastic admirer of the masters of the modern movement. Later on, however, in the fifties, together with contemporaries such as Aldo van Eyck, Jacob Bakema and Ralph Erskine, he founded Team 10, a group that was fiercely critical of the rigid functionalism of the CIAM. Since that time De Carlo has not ceased to analyze and criticise new developments and trends in architecture. In his public appearances and in his writings De Carlo denounced the anonymity of bureaucratic clients, the frivolous concern with symbolism in architecture that ducked any attempt to discuss its content and the prevalence of special interest groups in the field of architecture. A constantly recurring theme was accountability in architecture. In the eighties architecture went through a phase of being depoliticised; now in our own age his approach has again become amazingly topical. One article of his that is particularly striking is entitled *Legitimising Architecture* (Forum Vol.III, 1972, no. 1, pp. 8-20). In it he accused the profession of surrendering to the interests of people without any principles ('the expert exploiter of building areas, the manipulator of building codes, the cultural legitimator for the sacking of the city organised by financiers, politicians and bureaucrats'). This article deserves to be quoted in detail.

'Any discussion of the purposefulness, or historical legitimacy, of architecture in the contemporary world must necessarily begin with the acknowledgement of its present futility, assuming it as the origin of any investigation of architecture's future or past. (...) Thus with the rise of middle-class professionalism, architecture was driven into the realm of specialisation, where only the problems of "how" were relevant, as the problems of "why" were assumed to have been resolved once and for all.(...) Working on "how" without a rigorous control of "why" inevitably produces the exclusion of concreteness from the process of planning. Proposals for solving

problems necessarily stand midway between the definition of goals and evaluation of effects. The refusal to correlate one's own contribution with the two poles of motivation and control is a typical manifestation of the idiocy of forced specialisation. A manifestation which also influences the quality of the proposals and their capacity for resisting attempts to alter them'.

De Carlo goes on to argue for a renewed dialogue with the user in specific situations and concrete places. This attitude is reflected in the very modest place in his own practice that he gives to design. First and foremost for him is the social context in which the artefacts are situated. He states his viewpoint as follows: 'A building is not a building. A building, in the sense of walls, floors, empty spaces, rooms, materials, etc., is only the outline of a potential: it is only made relevant by the group of people it is intended for'. Giving form to a building implies an organisation and every organisation includes a problem of form. In this sense De Carlo's ideas about the organisation of society and his view of design are inseparable. His demand for legitimacy is given real weight by his genuinely committed attitude.

Even though his unquestioning belief in the 'real discussion with the occupants' has proved in practice to be not always justified, De Carlo's analysis of the marginalisation of the public has lost none of its force. Now that the question of the cultural legitimacy of architecture is being raised on all sides, his criticism has begun to attract attention once again. The question here is how this criticism can be restated at a time when architecture has become more popular than ever.

Giancarlo de Carlo (1919) died on June 4. The text above and the following conversation date back almost 18 years. The interview has been conducted by Ole Bouman and Roemer van Toorn, on October 7, 1987, on the occasion of Giancarlo de Carlo's opening speech of the lecture series *The Invisible in Architecture*, at the Delft University of Technology.

The thing about the formalists in architecture that makes me so angry is that they prettify conflicts with a lot of pretentious rubbish. There are conflicts all around us and they are ingredients of our imagination.

How do you want to work as an architect?

What I am looking for is a completely different solution to our spatial problems. I am looking for a style that is pluralistic and a-stylistic. What I am arguing for is a language and working method that has already been stated in much greater detail in other areas of the culture, for instance, in music. Someone like Frank Zappa or Prince, for instance, who does not think twice about working with a jazz saxophonist, succeeds in making a polysemic language. As architects we should take a much closer look at this kind of collaboration because it is a rich source of inspiration. In any case I think it is much more interesting than the institutional music. Stockhausen, Berlioz and Cage are very fascinating, but for very few people. On the other hand there is music that is rich and multi-faceted and that has a huge audience everywhere. These people are interested in polysemic forms of music. The same is true not just of music but also of video and television as well sometimes; new forms are being generated. This is something that we can't ignore; present-day society functions on so many different levels that no form of art, including architecture, can remain unambiguous. To talk about the eclectic style is therefore a contradiction in terms. A style by definition cannot be eclectic. A style is monological. Everybody should be able to find a meaning in architecture that corresponds with his or her cultural level, history or background. It is this sort of multi-faceted meaning that I am looking for in my own work. This is not easy. I would recommend you to read Italo Calvino's book, *Le città invisibili* (Torino, 1972). His intuition was very strong just because his descriptions of cities aim to create multiple layers of meaning.

As you are stating it now the question of style in architecture gets bogged down in an abstract concern with meaning. Sometimes it seems that the discussion about meaning ends up with meaning becoming a value in itself. What is your view of the relation between being open to meaning as a point of departure for a social critique of architecture, and the dogmatic exclusion of meaning at the end of the seventies and in the eighties in a revaluation of an autonomous impulse?

It's quite true that symbolism and meanings become more and more things in themselves. Instead of being results that one arrives at they become goals that are assumed before one starts. Peter Eisenman is a good case in point. In his programme he searches for meanings, or to be more precise, meta-meanings. He searches for a grammar, for deconstruction, for catharsis and all that sort of thing. This is however a completely unjustified abstract manipulation of the design process. It is sheer folly for an architect to be so arrogant as to say: here you are, here are your meanings from one to a hundred. If value in architecture is dependent on the say-so of a single person, even if that person is someone like Eisenman who constantly negates himself, then architecture as a whole becomes a complete failure. Fortunately, meaning in architecture is something that is much more concealed. Meaning will only appear after you have made a painstaking analysis of the assignment, taking into account the context in which it occurs, your own personal background, your view of society, your hopes and disappointments. It is a question also of how the people you are working for alter the process in order to give it life as they see it. Only after this process is complete will you perhaps achieve meaning, with the emphasis on the word perhaps. You cannot programme meaning in advance. One diagonal and then another diagonal and, hey presto, there's another pretty geometrical construction for you. You never get architecture like that. I recall a very odd lecture at Yale University where Palladio was reduced to a list of modules, so that his work ended up sounding like a petty cash book, a sum of credits and debits, pros and cons. No longer was any historical reference made to Venetian society in the 16th century; not a scrap of attention was paid to the needs behind his work. Palladio wanted to persuade people to organise space in a different way; he was a pioneer in the change that has taken place in our notions of space. Things like this also have a bearing on architecture. It isn't just a geometrical game. The science of architecture aims to develop an understanding of all the forces that may have an influence on the creation of space and spatial organisation. Understanding architectural space involves understanding the whole history of the particular place, city, land and culture that is involved. Also in designing possible future buildings - if

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that is still a possibility - you can state a view of the world and create a space in which balance or conflict become explicit. In the long run an approach like this gives you a broad perspective for dealing with details so that you are not confined to your own specialised field. In this way you make space for criticism.

Do you regard this as being so important that you conclude your argument with it?

Criticism is the beginning of change and anyone who doesn't keep his eyes closed can only approve of any changes in the status quo. The purpose of art always was to sharpen one's thought processes and to be open to criticism, not to gloss things over. The thing about the formalists in architecture that makes me so angry is that they prettify conflicts with a lot of pretentious rubbish. There are conflicts all around us and they are ingredients of our imagination.

How can one arrive at a critical stance and the resulting attitude of commitment in a pluriverse like ours? How can one feel sure enough of what one is doing and of the criteria for one's criticism while at the same time accepting the present cultural situation?

The more this 'pluriverse' develops the more necessary a new sort of criticism will become. A criticism that no longer regards the variety of forms and the multiple layers of meaning that belong to an architectural event as being sufficient, but which also contains a value judgement, a judgement that will of course be much more complicated than is usually the case at present. It is a case of a preparedness to make a judgement without the finalistic pretensions that usually go with such an attitude. Manfredo Tafuri is well known for his finalistic aspirations and that is a bad thing for the living architecture that I believe in.

Even though they have plenty of power, the critics are having a hard time at present. They get their power from the fact that architects are so afraid of criticism that they stuff their work as full as possible with the pet notions of the critics. Critics often sit on competition juries; this means that they exercise an influence on architectural production that is by no

means open. Despite their power the critics are afraid of missing the bus. Not in the sense of not spotting a new trend, because they are the ones who launch them, but rather of being too late for history in general. They don't want to repeat the mistake of once again overlooking a Salon des Indépendents or a Van Gogh. That means that they get on every bus that turns up and it's often the wrong one. They know that themselves and that's why they get off again at the next stop. The result is a chaos of publications.

Do you think that something like that can still be called criticism? Being critical presupposes a certain belief in yourself. The critics you mention apparently don't believe in themselves, in fact quite the reverse. Is that the end of criticism or can we just see it as a failure of certain individuals who, because of their professional position, are called critics?

There is no end of criticism, but there will be a change. The way in which criticism is practised nowadays hardly works any more. There will be critics who will write criticism that is parallel to a new architecture. The two do of course go together. Criticism won't disappear because its mediating role as well as its function of proclaiming and identifying new developments will always remain intact. A study like that of John Ackermann on Palladio that situates architecture so clearly in its cultural context could never have been produced by writers who did not have the historical or critical equipment. Criticism must be endless, especially in a time when increasing numbers of people are coming into contact with art. It will not be sufficient just to explain; hypotheses will need to be put forward as to how something is to be understood.

And what about the situation of the architect himself? If you acknowledge the political and cultural value of architecture, how can a specialist in this form find his or her way back to politics and culture?

Architecture is such a vague discipline that it can never become a fully specialist one. People often complain that architecture is really difficult, because it doesn't have any parameters; it isn't a form of arithmetic, nor is it just a branch

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of design. This is in fact a very good thing, because it means that the profession can never degenerate into being a purely specialist field. Architecture is always enlarging its scope; you can't impose boundaries on it. This means that I am not a specialist but someone with certain capacities. In other words, I do not just know how certain specific things have to be dealt with, but increasingly I attempt to understand why I deal with them in a certain way. This is also why I try to find a balance between the way that I work and the reason why I work.

It is a question of finding a unity between skill and motivation. This brings you to politics, because once you know what motivates you, you are also in a position to understand the role that is allotted to you in society. The idea that architecture is able to change society is out of date; but I continue to believe that architecture can produce concrete material stimuli that can lead to a change of this sort. It can provoke situations; it can create an atmosphere that is balanced or even unbalanced. You can use it to produce an expression of society or of that part of society that you work for or want to work for; you can also organise space in such a way that balance and conflict are both made explicit. This is the intellectual challenge of our profession. Of course you can never do it in a directly explicit way as one can with the written word. It is always indirect. Forms generate repose or a lack of repose and this is what opens one up to criticism.

Once again, change begins with criticism. In my view the function of art and architecture continues to be to encourage the viewer to think critically and so to be open to change. In itself architecture cannot change anything; what it does do is to prepare the way for change. We must do everything in our power to avoid using form to disguise reality. This is something that happens all the time and it makes me furious. In this respect my profession, despite all its theoretical power, doesn't relate at all to the situation as it is. That is a crying shame. If there are conflicts, it is our task to expose them.

Since you lay such emphasis on the social aspect we would like to ask you a typical Beaux-Arts question. In the approach you are suggesting is there any idea of architecture as an art form? Do you believe, to use Nikolaus Pevsner's classical terminology, in a difference between architecture and building?

That's something that I don't believe in. At most there are different talents with the usual differences in quality. I believe in a difference between relevant and irrelevant architecture, and in everything in between. Even the cheapest or most shabby building is architecture, because in my view architecture is an organisational activity; it has to do with the ordering of space. Every building transforms a space into a site, and so it becomes architecture, for better or for worse. This means that I do not believe in architecture with a capital A as the most perfect sort of building, because that way of classifying things leads to a completely false hierarchy. Classifications like this are arrogant and have no a priori justification; they have little to do with real problems. They make things easier for the critics maybe because they like to have a well-defined profession, but it is nonsense from the point of view of the actual occupants of the buildings. Just think for a moment of all the places that people occupy where you haven't a clue if they are worth anything as architecture; I am still obliged to take these places seriously. In cases like this the use justifies the form, and it is my job then to find out how something like that works: I have to learn from life; life doesn't have to learn from me.

But the advantage of an approach like Pevsner's is that it gives us certain conventions for what attractive architecture is.

Yes, that's true, but conventions wear out. Pevsner forgot a great number of buildings that I personally think are very attractive.

Let's put it a bit more generally then: when you look back on the whole tradition of architecture, your memory will still tend to select very 'architectural' architecture. Professionalism and artistic appeal are still apparently the criteria for the choices one makes.

In no sense do these criteria have any general validity; it depends on the taste of a person or group and is also very much dependent on the period. Many of Pevsner's choices are no longer so self-evident. Many buildings that he left out might now be included in a book like this. Even in my own

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career there are buildings that have sometimes been very important for me and at other times not. I would, however, like to make a qualitative distinction. The fact that in certain circumstance certain buildings can become exceptional long after they have been built, does not mean that all buildings are potentially good. (This is similar to the question of the critics all jumping on the bus: we would no longer be able to pass judgement on buildings because time is always capable of proving us wrong.) Some buildings are irrelevant; they have no special qualities. There are also buildings that do undoubtedly possess special qualities. In other words they have an additional excellence that enables them to transcend the ancient Vitruvian principles of *firmitas*, *commoditas* and *venustas*. You have to judge every building according to these criteria. Some examples of architecture will stand the test better, some worse: this is how you calculate the value of a building. But on top of this you sometimes achieve a super-quality: *concinnitas*. It is a question of something that Cicero saw in the rhetoric of someone who was capable of moving his public.

It is no longer a question of clarity or of being interesting, but also of an atmosphere whose fascination is universal. According to Alberti - and I agree with him totally - architecture is capable of attaining this level. It is at precisely this point that there are no longer any conventions or rules such as were still applicable to the other Vitruvian categories. I believe that this quality of perfect elegance has the power to enthrall everybody.

For instance?

In my lifetime I have seen only a few buildings that can lay claim to this quality. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Hadrian's Villa outside Rome and perhaps Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles. I have felt it in the *Palazzo Ducale* in Urbino. Everyone, no matter from what culture, gets a shock on seeing that palace. That is when architecture becomes a miracle. *Concinnitas* is a category of super-quality, a *qualité suprême*. Anyone who experiences something of this order will never be the same person again.