

language; and words, Margaret Drabble has said, are as peripheral to architecture as pictures are to novels.¹⁵ The difficulty of expressing a visual art in words makes the literary-minded English resort to witty metaphors. The Royal Fine Art Commission, English Heritage, planning authorities and amenity societies criticise designs rather than finished buildings. Only at this stage can influence on, and control of, design be exercised.

Traditionally the architect communicates by simulating a three-dimensional building in two dimensions with plan, section and elevation; or by greatly reducing the scale with three-dimensional models. The critic has to be able to interpret the architect's design, and this is best done from plan, section and elevation which the lay critic has difficulty in understanding. Models, which are more easily understood, are deceptive, and the more realistic the model, the more deceptive it is. The monochrome model, favoured by architects, is useful in assessing the form, massing and silhouette of a building, both in itself and in relation to its surroundings. The highly realistic model favoured by developers and planning authorities, emphasises the elevational treatment – the outer face and only part of a building most people ever see – at the expense of the organisation and form, bringing out the superficial, often Disneyland character of so much development today.

Understanding the plans, sections and elevations of a building is hard work but essential for a critic to be able to make a sound judgement. An easier and increasingly popular way of communicating with a lay public is by means of computer images, which makes it possible to simulate all the spaces of a building in sequence as if one was walking through them. By way of example, Stirling and Wilford's design for no.1 Poultry in the City of London has a beautiful plan and section, but the arguments about the relative merits of the existing and proposed buildings have been conducted almost entirely at the superficial level of external appearances. Perhaps the virtual reality of computer images would have helped even the most prejudiced to appreciate the consequences on the façades of the plan and section and to understand the building in three dimensions.

Appropriate and good buildings

Is an appropriate building necessarily a good building? English Heritage recently proposed as one of their criteria for the listing of post-war architecture, "intelligence, ingenuity or innovation in the planning and siting of a building".¹⁶ The original Thorn

House in London by Andrew Renton of Sir Basil Spence & Partners consisted of a simple, strong statement: a vertical slab contrasted with a low, horizontal base, for which the prototype is Skidmore Owing & Merrill's Lever House in New York. The concept is never likely to result in an appropriate building in the sense of a good fit, because it breaks up the traditional street which consists of continuous narrow-fronted buildings producing a vertical rhythm. The vertical slab, which is much taller than the existing buildings in the neighbourhood and so out of scale, together with the low horizontal base, work against the traditional street scene and produce a sharp contrast.

At the time of building in the early nineteen-sixties there were not many people who thought respecting or fitting in with the traditional urban pattern of much importance. The Royal Fine Art Commission agreed with the county council that a tower block "would do no damage and might help to redeem what has become a somewhat depressed area ..."¹⁷ The argument then prevailed that the whole street would in due course be rebuilt anyhow. Since then the attitude to our built surroundings has changed and people now see merit in preserving the street and other traditional urban spaces.

Conclusion

The criteria which have been proposed are not intended to be a check-list. The architect does not design in compartments or under separate headings, so that the critic's assessment of the design should also not be made under separate criteria. From what has been said it must be clear, in any case, that the criteria are inextricably bound up with one another. Choice and use of materials will affect rhythm, proportion, scale; massing is bound up with the plan and section; integrity underlies all the criteria. A building may embody every criterion and still not be a good building. Conversely it may be a good building without complying with any of the criteria if the architect is a good designer. The informed eye will quickly spot a good building irrespective of rules or guidelines.

The criteria, moreover, are objective values exhibiting facts which are not coloured by the feelings or opinions of the person making a judgement. To say that a building is good is not the same as saying "I like it". Judgements about design may be partly subjective, but the degree of subjectivity is reduced by scholarship and experience. The consensus which forms the basis of the Royal Fine Art