

Engaging with Critical Discourse in Architecture

In conversation with
Kevin Mark Low

Kiran Keswani

Tekton
Volume 4, Issue 2, September 2017
pp. 80 - 93



Kevin Mark Low is an architect by training and lives in the monsoon tropics. Raised in Southeast Asia, he spent nine years in the United States before returning to Malaysia with a Bachelor's degree in Architecture and a Minor in Art History from the University of Oregon (1988), and a Master's degree in Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1991). He worked ten years at GDP Architects in Kuala Lumpur upon return, running the research and special projects division, and made a decision to reclaim old dreams of sole practice in 2002. Since then, he has been invited to teach and lecture at Institutes of Architecture and Universities in South Asia, Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

With completed earlier work published in architectural journals internationally, contribution of numerous articles in architectural journals regionally, and authorship of the book *smallprojects* (adaptus/orogroup, 2010) for international distribution, Kevin still works alone - his current work includes a temple, a mountain chapel, a fifty-storey tower, a town well, another book, and teaching.

✉ lkd.sps@gmail.com
www.small-projects.com

Several years ago, as an architecture student working in Ahmedabad, I had the chance to live for a few months inside the Indian Institute of Management campus designed by Louis Kahn and Anant Raje. During my stay there alongside the management students, I constantly heard about how the campus did not quite work for them. The inside of the hostel rooms with their exposed brick walls were dark and gloomy. When it rained, the water gushed down from the terrace and flooded the staircase lobbies. I listened to what had not worked for the users. I also saw what had worked, as I experienced the ‘silence’ and the ‘light’ that Kahn had talked about in his writings on architecture.

Now, twenty years later, as I live in Bangalore, I have had the opportunity to experience closely yet another acclaimed architectural project – the IIM-Bangalore campus designed by Balkrishna Doshi. There is a sense of delight each time you walk inside the buildings with the light that comes down from the pergolas and the green foliage touching the stone walls. You experience how the built and the unbuilt space merge beautifully. And, here again, the students and the faculty do not share either fascination or respect for the building. Instead, you are told “when it rains, you cannot walk from one classroom to another”, or “the building has not generated the social interaction that it could have amongst its students and faculty”, and so on.

When you find that the two buildings that have meant so much to you, do not mean as much to the non-architects, you ask yourself, what went wrong? Could we not have avoided the discontent amongst the users of these campuses? Was there not enough interaction between the architects and consumers? Is it enough to design a building and to not ask over time, how do buildings learn and how do campuses grow? How can we engage in a deeper critical discourse amongst ourselves as an architectural community?

When I met Kevin Low for the first time in Ahmedabad in August, I asked him a few questions on this. Shared below are some of his thoughts.

KESWANI

In the architecture profession, we seem to hesitate to criticize each other. We may be hindering our collective growth as a result. What can we do about this?

LOW

Yes, this is true. It would be lovely to see the creation of a platform where one can give and receive critique without ever feeling afraid of being marginalized from the professional

network, wouldn't it? However, before we can get to the question of what can be done, perhaps we first need to discuss why this hesitation exists, to have a clearer understanding of the problem before suggestions for betterment can be made.

I believe a great part of the issue lies in the fact that many are afraid of stating a point of view that might come across as just that - a subjective point of view, and mere opinion. However, when issues are discussed dialectically with relevant logical, rational, and specific context grounding its content, mere opinion is elevated to epistemology, and justified belief follows. This manner of critical discourse is what appears to be lacking in the world. Many of us simply do not feel qualified enough to support the statements we make, or perhaps lack the ability to express why we believe what we do.

A rather more frightening reason is that many of us do not understand the full complexity of what architecture is, and for that reason, believe that subjective differences account for the many ways it has come to be interpreted, that one's truth may well be another's fiction. We have become afraid to be socially incorrect by exacting critique on someone else's reality. In many circumstances in fact, due to the complexities involved, we do indeed prioritize only certain aspects of architecture over others, and these usually prove to involve formal aspects of the field (the sensual impact of how things look and feel) rather than those deeper issues of content (the way rich and enlightening relationships are created).

Last, and perhaps most importantly, leading architectural publications globally focus on marketing the glow and expressive perfection of projects, rather than conducting a thorough analysis of them. This seems to be in keeping with prevailing attitudes and paradigms of the hype and *branding* that comes from the publishing industry. While it is possible that their editors and writers experience the same difficulties expressed earlier, I suspect this to be a simple default of the way it has always been done. Mind you, all this is not to say that journals should take to the publication of projects lacking critical worth; only that whatever

projects deemed worthy of publication undergo study and critique equally worthy of intelligent engagement.

In keeping with the question of fostering critical discourse, I think that a deeper understanding regarding the relevance of duality would be tremendously useful to the profession. The very basis of creativity is founded on the relationship between form and content. This is relevant because it differentiates the act of styling from that of design, and distinguishes mere answers of form from questions of content. Perhaps, platforms can be created where participants and speakers exchange presentations, each presenting the work and projects of another to deeper discursive critique of the work - in engaging constructive critique rather than unconstructive praise, we thus learn from our failures rather than espouse success, graciously acknowledging that the work we produce can be as imperfect as the human beings we are.

KESWANI

In some disciplines, there does exist a culture of questioning one's own work and that of others which helps move the entire profession forward in a positive way. If we do not learn from this, what do we lose?

LOW

Everything.

Although, to be sure, the culture of self-critique is not quite present in many, if not most other disciplines either! Which is a probable reason why so much in academia and professional practice hinges on peer review. These are mechanisms to keep us in check, that we do not even adopt in architectural circles. Whatever the case, while we might believe that inexperience results in younger practices lacking the ability to self-check, it is interesting to note that the lack of self-critique is most evident in *successful* firms that experience rapid growth in size, project scale, and staff numbers. The mentoring that comes from apprenticeship falls away in the face of deliverables and economics. Most forget that self-critique can be manifest only when the work is done by oneself, and not by employees under

duress. We tend to be the most passionate in production of our best work at the beginning of our careers, rather than after we have already achieved that measure of acclaim.

Over the years, I have found a simple pattern regarding the work of well-known and established architectural practices - that the most interesting and critical work in any great architect's oeuvre is most commonly performed before the architect became famous.

An integral part of my teaching involves getting my students to understand that nothing kills creative integrity quicker than success. A teacher in Karachi, Fariha Amjad Ubaid, once told me of an old *sufi* proverb that says it so much more succinctly – “*If you want to destroy a man, praise him.*” Our lack of deeper self-critique is led in great part by human nature, and through the effect of regressive lessons learned from the developed world on it, in using words to brand and tell stories that our work itself fails to. We suffer the need to be constantly assured that what we do is praiseworthy. This is regardless of whether it actually is, and most of all if it is not, our having forgotten that self-improvement only happens in the face of the recognition of our flaws, not our perfections. The truth is that the act of self-critique is a terribly difficult one to cultivate, and more so to realize. The effort it takes to reflect on the myriad and complex relationships that govern our decisions, in constant edit and refinement, demands a sense of humility that is rare indeed today – which does clarify the deeper meanings of that *sufi* proverb. It is indeed a testament to its truth that presentations of architectural work currently focus almost exclusively on the positives of formal and sensual delight that our buildings bring us, to the almost complete lack of any deeper discussion of related content. This results in audiences being mostly left either in a state of unutterable awe, or painfully dissatisfied at the end of any presentation. Beauty does leave us in only one state or the other, as debate cannot be made over polka dots and pinstripes – you love blue but I like pink – who is right or wrong? And indeed, who truly cares? Discussions about beauty, about *form*, inevitably leave us in a state of suspension, and *opposition*. And, what a silly opposition to be found caught up in since no one can

definitively say that the amazing curved cladding on that building was the perfect counterpoint to its being sited in the jagged mountains, or hard-edged cliffs by the deep blue sea. As such, self-critique in the *engagement of content* is only that which can drive the profession in deeper possible ways. Self-aggrandizement in the *promotion of form* merely maintains the status quo, and indeed sets all of learning back in regression.

KESWANI

What seems to happen because of this restricted learning environment, not only are we not moving forward but also causing to affect the expectations of users/clients and their perception of us as people who can or cannot design environments effectively.

LOW

Architects tend to use words to bolster their work – in the way that *natural ventilation* is being bandied about as a virtue, without our deeper consideration that any space not built as such is illegal by law and uninhabitable by fact. The expression *sustainable architecture* in reference to fresh construction is by fact a contradiction in terms, since anything that is brand new is itself already inherently unsustainable. Because relatively little of what architectural professionals present in their work is tacitly honest, and subtly or unsubtly postured as revolutionary, or at least ‘creative’, our overt show boating has painfully rendered much of the profession irrelevant. The global network unwittingly works towards silencing voices that do not follow protocol and the accepted rules of ‘polite’ engagement through their exclusion in curated discourse. The solidarity within the dominant paradigm deafens it to rational voices of discontent, the intelligent sighs that accompany each of our public displays. It should be no wonder then that the profession of architecture has become so disrespected by the insightful masses. There are only a few who pay attention to architects and what they do other than architects themselves.

KESWANI

We are reminded of how Christopher Day begins in his book *'Places of the Soul'*- "Architects tend to think architecture matters. Not everyone else does. To many people buildings are expensive, but not very interesting. It's what goes on *inside* them that matters."

LOW

Yes, that's completely true. The reason why our profession has become irrelevant is because it has been too obsessed with the hawking of formal aesthetics, and not enough with the discursive issues of critical content. The teaching and profession of architecture has simply prioritized the moulding of outside-in over consideration of the inside-out – which is to say that we put little effort to actual design, being overly focused on styling. I believe what Christopher Day means to say is; faced with the commission for the design of a school, most architects begin with the question of what their school will look like, when a more interesting and relevant question would be what a school actually is, or could be.

KESWANI

You mentioned the need for a platform for sharing between architects. How do you foresee this happening?

LOW

For all the lack of critical discourse globally, a growing voice of resistance can nonetheless be heard in pockets internationally. Seed and established practices, and teachers in unrelated parts of the world – James Russell and Kevin O'Brien of Brisbane, Cheah Kok Ming and Nirmal Kishani from the National University of Singapore, Tsukamoto Lab in Tokyo, Avianti Armand and David Hutama from Jakarta, Defry Ardianto of Surabaya, Girish Doshi in Pune, Choie Funk in Manila, Diego Grass from Chile, and many others – attempts in disparate places are being made to question dominant paradigms in support of less form-driven agendas.

David Sanderson, who holds the Judith Nielsen Chair in Sydney and has been involved in human relief efforts and disadvantaged

communities for most of his life, speaks of the profession's undue obsession with formal solutions that make elegant but irrelevant architectural contribution in answer to aesthetics, when issues of logistics for disaster and relief efforts are the actual problem.

In events that I am invited to, whenever permitted, I attempt to address issues with my presentations rather than perform the ever-ubiquitous *show/tell*. And, if the presentation of my own architectural work is preferred, I try to frame the body of work within a structure that prioritizes issues and principles, rather than have it come off as a typical run-through of projects. As a viewer, I find it terribly disappointing when the duration of any lecture is governed purely by the number of projects presented! Individually, and even without the formal support of a platform for questioning existing trends, we each can make positive alternative contributions through the way we conduct ourselves.

I believe many other ways exist for greater relevant exchange to happen, encouraged by openness to different formats of presentation - we simply need to realize that the current paradigm represents sensibilities closer to the business of marketing hype than that of involved critical discourse. And, in line with the *relevant alternative*, I imagine it vital for these alternative platforms to engage discourse beyond architects alone, with the participation of critical thinkers and historians, writers- questioning the socio-capitalist evolution and change - the kind of people with words and ideas unlike anything we might have ever heard before.

KESWANI

You've been saying let us look at failures and not just at successes.

LOW

Yes, I believe that case and precedent studies have been incorrectly used for the past five generations in architectural teaching – that the study of a project to identify all its solutions and positives merely lead us to appropriate those same solutions in our own work – with some adaptation of course, but nonetheless to result that still represents cut/paste instincts.

We benefit most, however, when a project is examined and analyzed for its flaws and problems, the identification of which then leads us to develop our own original solutions in response. Thus, lessons are learned less from the imitation of success, than through an understanding of failure.

KESWANI

You are also saying that if you look at failure, then, failure has more to do with content, because when you do look at success, you look at form. Is that your argument?

LOW

No, not necessarily, since success or failure could have to do with either. When I say that one cannot truly learn anything from success, it is not merely in formal terms, because even the appropriation of successful content from a precedent results in sensibilities of a cut/paste nature. The issue of failure is what is at stake here –and more so, with the development of our abilities to recognize and identify it. Whether it is through the evidence of irrelevant form or content, one’s ability to perceive and analyze a problem is what begins the journey of design.

KESWANI

It is difficult to cut & paste content. Not unless you have understood the content can you do this.

LOW

Fair enough. And yet, even if it concerns content, cut/paste is still cut/paste – it is still representative of appropriation rather than working from first principles. The study of failure begins the *comprehension of a problem* - that development of a relevant question- served by the intangible nature of critical content. One’s solution to failure may well be a response by way of form, but more critically, *as a result* of having identified a problem of original content. The solution may or may not be original, depending on how good one’s sense of history is (both long past and immediately recent!), and it also depends on how hard one is on oneself – obviously, a great number of pre-existing

solutions might well work in relation to an original problem, but the most critical architects in the world take the next and most difficult step of casting all that aside. They are not merely driven by uncovering original problems, but in developing solutions that have never quite been seen or heard before. We seem to have forgotten how difficult the act of design can be, so focused on styling the world has become.

So, what exactly constitutes critical content? The example of a library could be referred to here – what indeed is a library? A place where books are stored? Or read? Or is it, as pretentious architects might wish to have it put, a sacred receptacle for knowledge and vault of wisdom? I four question begins with the *formal* idea of a holy receptacle or vault, the *objects* and spaces thus represented are exactly what will guide our journey, to result in a building created for the iconisation of knowledge over the people it is supposed to serve. Conversely, if we dwell a little longer over what exactly a library *is or could be*, it becomes clear that as some of the most profound moments of reading can occur sitting on a toilet, it obviously is not about a special place to read either! And while libraries are a repository for books, truth dawns when we ask the simple but relevant question of what way that storing of books happens. It is, in fact, a very special way that books are archived - that due to the sheer numbers of volumes in the best libraries, books must find collection in a manner that any book can be located with sufficient ease. It is with this simple fact that our true journey begins.

The internet serves as a good point of departure here, since there isn't a single thing in it that did not first begin in the oldest libraries we know. For example, when a friend informs about something gone viral on *YouTube*, that's the first thing you search for when you get to your laptop. And, an interesting thing happens when you do- this little sidebar shows up, with a pretty involved list of somewhat-related videos - and as is often the case, we end up opening window after window, before, during, and after our original search, ending with between six to sixteen opened windows of stuff to check on, two items of which were way more interesting in content than the gossipy original –how fortunate. Or was it?

Now the libraries of old did not have computers to help us find books, all they had were musty old cabinets with dozens of tiny drawers filled with pieces of thick paper they called a card catalog. Every single volume in that library's collection was represented by a single card, with title, author, publisher, ISBN number or equivalent, and location, identified by stack and bay. This meant that every time one needed to find a book, the first place one hit was the card catalogue, with drawers usually marked according to title, the first perhaps from AAA through AAZ, and this is how a search began. And, while looking through the cards for the one searched for, all these other potentially interesting titles would be thumbed through, with note taken of each potential find for further investigation. Armed thus, with say, three other titles, one began the trudge through the library stairs and stacks, except that the great libraries turned that trudge into a journey of magic. With bays arranged and configured to maximize stack frontage without sacrifice to search navigation or orientation- the traditional open shelving, every exposed spine was an invitation to delve into.

You see, the act of *browsing* simply began as a default as to how books needed to be stored in order to find focused access. Of course the better libraries realized the possibilities that necessity created, and attempted more opportunities for the wondrous experience of accidental discovery. But the truth is, the idea of having an *entire* library structured around the delight of finding books that were not actually searched for, has never been truly explored, even if it was how the great libraries worked. This is what I believe creates deeper content, questions of what typologies or things are, and everything else they could be in the forging of new powerful relationships that bind us all. In the case of the library, I would imagine it could involve the lost magic of browsing.

Questions pertaining to relevance and powerful relationships of critical content are what begin the act of design.

KESWANI

If we want to make critical discourse popular and we were to say that critical discourse is a creative act, how would we do it? How do we show that there is creativity in critical discourse, that it is a creative mind that can engage in critical thinking?

LOW

Seeing we herd ourselves more often than tread new ground, the most engrossing discussions are had when beliefs about how our world functions are questioned in a way that makes us realize how much else we might be missing. Consider the case of having to make a choice between being given every new Apple product for free the rest of one's life, or having mere monthly paid access to the Worldwide Web. You will agree that only a fool would opt for the Apple deal. So, we all know who created the Apple company, but who created the Worldwide Web? Few would recognize the name, let alone the face of Tim Berners-Lee, an Englishman in a Swiss laboratory who chose not to patent the idea when he realized how powerful it was. And, this quite succinctly describes the sensibilities of the world we currently inhabit- a place where people who make money and stuff are valued and iconised over those who make an actual difference.

And this represents the sort of creative discourse that interests us all, subtle treatment of the obvious in a manner that delivers simple life lessons. In this case, that making a true difference in the world should never be equated with fame, or how the world defines value.

We must collectively begin to present and discuss ideas in an intelligent, relevant way to encourage the questions that create discourse. Whenever possible, I use lecture opportunities to discuss precedent studies of well-known buildings that have never truly seen critical study, and reconfigure analyses of those buildings to transcend their formal qualities, beautiful or ugly, in more relevant critique of their content. And, keeping these lectures succinct and focused, allow more time for questions and discourse in ways that creates greater interest among students and younger architects alike, in looking at architectural work and

themselves more critically. It feels this needs to be done in a way that can help us discover, reveal undercurrents and issues that receive deeper consideration in their being aired. Few realize that one of the most creative acts to ever experience is that of discovery, and in either case, be it discovery or invention, it all begins with the discovery of a question. One that has more to do with specific context and content than that ever-pervasive search for new form.

Problems and questions of greatest relevance are uncovered, or *discovered*, I've found. For the simple reason that discovery has been historically seen as a *revealing-of* something already in existence, invention appears to hold higher creative ground in the way it calls for the *bringing-into-existence* of things not already there. What awful disregard for discovery, which I have always considered one of the most creative acts imaginable! Leonardo da Vinci is often heralded as a great inventor and painter, indeed ahead of his other abilities, when his greatest achievements and gifts to us were his abilities as a discoverer – arguably the most astute and remarkable observer and perceiver ever known. A study of the Codex Atlanticus reveals that much of what has been attributed to him as an inventor were mostly refinements to pre-existing machines and tools, and technical mimicry or mechanized appropriation of how nature itself functioned. Never mind all that work he did improving machines of destruction and *war!* However, what truly stand apart as his towering achievements are the graphic recordings of his observations - his *discoveries*. From dissections of birds and beasts, to graphic studies of fluid dynamics, the understanding of natural phenomena to human entrails and musculature; he proves how the act of discovery is itself one of the most creative acts to possibly engage.

Leonardo showed us that everything begins with the simplest words of *why*, *how*, *when*, and the *where* of explicit processes – that the remarkable act of discovery was one of relevant questions. And that the great formal invention can only begin with the creative discovery of critical content. ■



Kiran Keswani is an architect & urban designer based in Bangalore. She has recently completed her PhD in Urban design from the Faculty of Planning, CEPT University, Ahmedabad. She is in the process of setting up the *Everyday City Lab* which will focus on design, research & teaching on issues of spatial informality and how it is influenced by the everyday practices of people. She has taught courses on

The Everyday City at the Azim Premji University, Bangalore and at CEPT University, Ahmedabad.

Her recent publications include a co-authored chapter on 'Territoriality in Urban space' in the book *Informal Urban Street Markets* (2015) and a paper on 'The Practice of Tree worship in the production of Urban space' published in the *Journal of Urban design* (2017).

✉ kiranmkeswani@gmail.com