

**Critique architecturale
et débat public**

sous la dir. de **Hélène Jannièrè & Paolo Scrivano**

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Abstract For the radical British architect Cedric Price (1934–2003), architecture was above all a social art. Price considered architecture’s essential role in society to be that of creating “continuous dialogue”. This idea of architecture as a social process could equally apply to Price’s architectural discourse. As a public intellectual and polemicist, Price sought not only to reach a broader audience but also to stimulate a sense of societal awareness and public debate within the architectural profession. This article focuses on Price’s activity as a critic with the aim of defining some possible alternatives in architectural criticism’s relationship to public debate. More specifically, it makes a case for a “dialogic” approach to criticism based on Price’s creative experiments in mass media, journalism and writing.

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Dialogic Criticism. Cedric Price's Supplements, Reviews and Columns 1960–1999*

What do we have architecture for? It's a way of imposing order or establishing a belief, and that is the cause of religion to some extent. Architecture doesn't need those roles anymore; it doesn't need mental imperialism; it's too slow, it's too heavy and, anyhow, I as an architect don't want to be involved in creating law and order through fear and misery. Creating a continuous dialogue with each other is very interesting; it might be the only reason for architecture, that's the point.

Cedric Price (quoted by Obrist, 2009: 68)

For the radical British architect Cedric Price (1934–2003), architecture was above all a social art. Towards the end of his life, in a conversation with art curator and historian Hans Ulrich Obrist, Price characterized the essential role of architecture as that of creating “continuous dialogue”. Already in the 1970s, referring to one of his favourite authors, the architect Trystan Edwards, Price argued that “the finest art is the art of manners and the second art is that of language” (1975). Although Price was again speaking about architecture, that is, as a social process, this idea of “continuous dialogue” and

“the art of manners” could equally apply to Price's architectural discourse. Although Price is most often remembered as the architect of such seminal projects as the Fun Palace or the Potteries Thinkbelt, he was also a highly respected journalist, critic, lecturer, educator, researcher, and polemicist. As a public intellectual, Price sought not only to reach a broader audience but also to stimulate a sense of societal awareness and public debate within the architectural profession. In the following article, I will focus on Price's activity as a critic with the aim of identifying some possible alternatives in architectural criticism's relationship to public debate.

Mediations: architectural theory, criticism and journalism

If architectural criticism can be recognized as playing a valuable role in mediating between architecture and public opinion, it can also be considered to perform an important mediating function within architectural discourse itself, that is, as a critical practice situated somewhere between architectural theory and architectural journalism. Hierarchically, architectural theory and journalism tend to represent the “high” and “low” registers of architectural discourse. Moreover, architectural theory, while often closely related to the practices of history and criticism, is rarely seen as a function of architectural journalism. Indeed, many

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architectural historians and critics relegate the journalist to the role of a neutral agent or observer who simply records and communicates news and information without comment¹. But media theorists and historians would argue that reporters “make” stories and that the “making” of stories involves critical investigation and interpretation, even imagination (Schudson, 1996). Admittedly, this neat division of architectural discourse is far from being a simple or uncontested matter. For Price, however, these discursive grey zones provided an ideal forum to challenge traditional modes of architectural discourse and develop new forms of public engagement.

Certainly one of the most productive fronts in this respect was the overlap between criticism and journalism or what some scholars have called “journalistic criticism”². Suzanne Stephens, for example, in one of the few scholarly studies to be devoted to the subject, has demonstrated how the writings of American “journalist critics” like Lewis Mumford, Ada Louise Huxtable or Herbert Muschamp, raised the public consciousness of architecture in newspapers and magazines addressed to a lay public (2009: 43–66). Distinguishing their “practical” concerns with building and city planning from the more philosophical and intellectual approach of “theoretical critics” appearing in academic journals, Stephens points out that in spite of their general accessibility, journalist critics nonetheless engaged with important theoretical issues that oriented their analyses. For example, Mumford’s critical reviews in the *New Yorker* were, as Stephens argues, closely related to his critical historical surveys. His prolific output as a “public critic” was a sustained effort to counterbalance the effects of capitalism on urban planning policy according to modernist ideals of social welfare and collective property (2009: 48–56).

According to Stephens, the split between academic and journalistic criticism can be understood as a difference in terms of audience, but one which contributed to an important chasm between theory and practice that was increasingly felt in academic and professional milieus alike starting in the late 1980s (Stephens, 1998: 68). This dichotomy between the “theoretical” criticism of academics and the “practical” criticism of journalists raises important questions as to how to delineate and situate architecture’s *professional* audience which comprises not only architects of course, but also policy makers, developers, economists, engineers, manufacturers, contractors, labourers, not to mention professional organizations, associations and governing bodies. Should the professional public of architecture be addressed as a specialist audience with its own culture and language, distinct from academe yet similarly “autonomous”? Or, on the contrary, should it be assimilated to a general readership closer to the mind-set of journalist critics?

Stephens’ review of the state of twentieth century architectural criticism in America notes some significant attempts to bridge the gap between academic and journalistic approaches and take into account a broader public such as the focus on the experiential dimensions of buildings, even though again there exist notable differences in attitude (Stephens, 1998: 194³). As Stephens insists: “Most emphatically, critics need to confront the ways in which they can communicate to their various publics” (1998: 194). Without rejecting the prospects of a possible synthesis between “theoretical” and “practical” approaches to architectural criticism – as Stephens’ critique suggests – I wish to make a case here for a slightly different option based on the example of Price, a variant of journalistic criticism that I will define as *dialogic criticism*.

1 See for example Huet (1995).

2 On “journalistic criticism” see Pousin ; Stephens (1998; 2002).

3 On bridging the gap between academic and journalistic criticism, Stephens notes in particular the essays of Cynthia Davidson and Sarah Whiting in *ANY 21* (December 1997), “How the Critic Sees: Seven Critics on Seven Buildings”.

Dialogics and mass media

Price's idea of "continuous dialogue" can be likened to what sociologist Richard Sennett has called "dialogic" cooperation (2012). Sennett distinguishes "dialogics" from "dialectics" as two different types of conversation aimed at working cooperatively in society. As opposed to the dialectic play of opposites that gradually builds up to a common understanding or agreement, "dialogics" do not aim at finding a common ground or arriving at a synthesis. Instead "dialogic" conversation involves "bouncing off views and experiences in an open-ended way" where, in the process of exchange, "people become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another". In this mode of "divergent exchange", states Sennett (2012: 24), "people do not fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, yet they get knowledge and pleasure from the exchange".

A prime site for the development of Price's "dialogic" approach to criticism was his engagement with mass media. In May 1960, for example, while in the process of setting up his architectural practice, Price completed a preliminary script for a short television documentary on architecture. Commissioned by the newly launched British ITV station, Anglia Television, which was to serve the East of England including Cambridge where Price had begun his architectural studies (1952–55), the film was scheduled to be part of a series entitled *Angles* that aimed to document local life through a wide range of topics amongst which architecture.⁴ One of the features of Price's film was the use of "on-site" interviews with owners and occupants. This was a popular discursive technique in television documentary at the time related to the availability of increasingly mobile recording technology, namely portable tape recorders and 16 mm lightweight cameras, but also, as media scholar John Corner notes, the

influence of British radio reportage that had developed since the 1930s "an imaginative organisation of recorded voices" (Corner, 1991: 42). Thus, from the very beginning of his career, Price developed a dialogic form of writing involving the interaction of multiple voices and a sensitivity to "accessed speech" (*ibid.*). Moreover, Price was not alone in realising the programme but had the support of professionals who helped to translate his ideas and notes into the language of television media. For example, in the final version of the script, *Angles* programme associate, Dick Gilling, reformulated Price's intentions from the point of view of documentary television:

*It is pretty essential for the programme to have local interest and human interest. We can go onto a fairly high plane as long as one foot is kept on the ground – and that foot can be the people living in the buildings we show*⁵.

Other experiences in television contributed as well to Price's awareness of the complex interrelationship between ideas, language, and audience. During the 1960s, for example, Price was invited as an architect interviewee to a number of current affairs programmes and documentary features. One notable appearance was in a 1964 episode of the BBC series *What's Next?* in which Price participated to a discussion on the future of shopping. As the correspondence leading up to the studio recording session reveals, Price's notes were rewritten in order to render his points more accessible to a lay public. As one letter from the production assistant suggests, Price's "language" gave some cause for concern:

The ideas are very valuable indeed, but we doubt whether people who have no background knowledge will understand what you are getting at, unless you are more precise and colloquial in your language. Your wording is much too academic to get across. At the risk of making you angry, we have tried to rewrite your points in words that we think will mean

4 C. Price, May–October 1960. *Angle feature programme – Anglia Television*. [scripts, notes and correspondence] Cedric Price fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, DR2004:1487.

5 D. Gilling, 8 September 1960. [Letter to Price], *ibid.*

*a lot more to ordinary people*⁶.

How closely Price took note of these comments is uncertain. But judging from the feedback from the show's producer Beryl Radley, Price seems to have struck an effective balance between "colloquial" and "academic":

*I felt I must write you to thank you very much for the splendid way you turned up the trumps on the day of our shopping programme. With judicious cutting to take out one or two dips, the final discussion should come out, thanks to you, as a thought-provoking piece*⁷.

Price's engagement with television was also significant on a theoretical level. For the Canadian media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, who was a key influence on Price's use of mass media as a creative and aesthetic repertoire, television was the quintessential mass medium of the new post-war "electric age". Before the digital revolution brought on by Internet, which McLuhan's vision of the "global village" effectively anticipated, it was the new medium of television introduced in the 1950s that best exemplified McLuhan's theory of the multisensory participatory potential of mass media. Although cinema did engage multiple senses too, it was the social situations of television, that is to say, the domestic environment of the home or settings where members of the audience (usually smaller than in a cinema) were potentially visible to one another, that McLuhan felt promoted social interaction and participation in the medium (McLuhan, 1964a; 1964b). In addition, television, like radio or newspapers, offered short unrelated programmes, which, in the case of commercial networks, were interrupted between and within by advertising breaks. Television according to McLuhan demanded more audience involvement in the process, albeit in a casual semi-distracted manner.

Price made recurrent reference to McLuhan's concepts such as the distinction between "hot" and "cold" media, "cold" media being more participatory in its use and operation (Price, 1964). He also integrated McLuhan's concepts into his design work as in his McAppy project report (1973–1976) in which he recommended the establishment of an "early warning system", an idea that McLuhan had developed in his "DEW-Line Newsletters" of the late 1960s. "DEW-Line" was an acronym for "Distant Early Warning Line", a defence system set up in Alaska and in the northern reaches of Canada during the Cold War to detect and report any incoming invasion of North America by the Soviet Union. The "DEW-Line" became a metaphor for McLuhan of the role of art and the artist in anticipating the future of society in a time of rapid social and technological change (Marchand, 1990: 209–210).

But more than the conceptualization of the effects of mass media, it was McLuhan's analytical method that had the most profound impact on Price. McLuhan referred to his method as a "mosaic or field approach" which consisted of "probes" in the form of aphoristic-like textual fragments, often inquisitive or provocative in nature (McLuhan, 1962: 7). Price developed a very similar synoptic writing style, even borrowing McLuhan's term "probes" to characterize his own discourse. As scholar Elena Lamberti describes it, McLuhan's writing was a kind of "open text" or "writing in progress" in which the writer and the reader became "co-producers" of meaning in an open-ended process akin to conversation (Lamberti, 2012: 45–46). McLuhan himself proclaimed that his writing was "part of a dialogue, a conversation" (Kostelanetz, 1967) and quoted Joyce who asked: "Are not my consumers my producers?" (McLuhan, 1962: 278). Indeed, society and the art of conversation were closely linked. As McLuhan observed in the early 1960s:

6 D. Potter, *What's Next? Production Assistant*, 31 January 1964. [Letter to Price], *ibid*.

7 B. Radley, *What's Next? Producer*, 11 February 1964. [Letter to Price], *ibid*.

*The whole tendency of modern communications whether in the press, in advertising or in the high arts is towards participation in the process, rather than apprehension of concepts*⁸.

Serial discourse as a critical method

Another formative source for Price's dialogic criticism was the Victorian novelist Charles Dickens. Although Price's love of Dickens is well known⁹, one often overlooked connection, and which is particularly relevant in the context of this discussion, is Dickens' activity as a journalist and reporter. At the age of nineteen, Dickens entered journalism as a parliamentary reporter. He excelled in covering debates and published his first texts as journalistic sketches of everyday life. But like his later work, these stories were only later published in book form. Throughout his career, Dickens published his novels in *serial form*, either in weekly episodes in magazines or monthly instalments in the penny press, even synchronising the timing of his stories' events to report the passing months of his readers. In this way, Dickens sought to bring his stories closer to the *here-and-now* of his readers' lives, generating anticipation of each new episode as part of the everyday life of his readership. Dickens thought about his novels through the serial format of the *news* (Drew, 2003).

Serial form is also a salient feature of the manner in which Price structured his own discourse, such as in his work for television or radio, his public lectures, or his involvement with architectural magazines. In the early 1970s, for example, Price ran a series of monthly features in *Architectural Design* known as the "Cedric Price Supplement" in which he presented a selection of projects and texts, many previously unpublished, each accompanied by a personal commentary or "rethink" printed in red (Price, 1970–72). As a form of retrospective dialogue or self-critique, Price even indicated

– through annotated coloured drawing overlays – what he perceived to be weaknesses in his designs or discrepancies between planning and "what actually happened", as well as sketched solutions or updates (Fig. 1). As Price stated in the introduction to the first supplement:

I realise there is an element of horror comic about all this – if architects' shortfalls were more widely known, then who knows, our individual productivity might well be collectively accelerated (Price, 1970: 145).

This self-reflexive monograph had an additional design feature that allowed the reader the possibility of detaching each supplement and composing the material like a "do-it-yourself" book. This participation in the medium, not unlike a serialized Dickens novel, can also be understood within the evolution of commercial print media and newspapers in particular. The introduction of feature supplements in British newspapers in the early 1960s, the first appearing in the *Sunday Times* (notably in colour), became a widespread phenomenon by the 1970s. This was related to larger social transformations such as "free time" which significantly boosted newspaper readership, and notably on weekends when reading became a popular leisure activity.

The reader as producer

The self-reflexive cultivation of critical reading practices as opposed to simply the expression of a critical point of view increasingly became the central focus of Price's activity as a critic. In 1975, for example, Price participated to a television programme organized by the AA School's Communications Unit in which he discussed his favourite magazines (*Architectural Magazines*, 1975). Departing from his previous reviews of books that primarily dealt with theoretical positions in architectural debate such as his assessment of Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Price, 1960), Price shifted his attention to practical advice on critical reading habits. For his televised AA talk, for example, Price recommended that the

8 McLuhan, 14 March 1951. Letter to Harold Adams Innis in Molinaro et al. (1987: 221).

9 See for example P. Keiller, "London–Rochester–London", in Obrist (2003: 168–85); Rattenbury (2014); Hardingham (2016, vol. 2: 9).

I have tried very carefully to discover why, for whom, and with what end in view were the latest batch of books produced. I avoid the word 'written' since many, though using words, string them around illustrations more as a decorative frame than as an information panel. (Price, 1979: 59)

As Price argued, this “decorative” use of words belonged to a long tradition of architectural “textbooks” dating back to Antiquity that were produced for patrons, builders, architects and potential “consumers” of architecture as *practical* guides to and for the reproduction of further building. In other words, Price contended that the wider appeal of architectural handbooks for general cultural enrichment was historically of secondary importance. Subscribing to this approach, Price considered that architectural books should act primarily as “tools” for design rather than aspire to become “quasi-socio-scientific theories of mankind”. Compared to architectural magazines, however, he was generally much more critical of trends in architectural books. He often complained that books were too slow to produce, that there was an alarming lack of wit and modesty in their literary style, and that their design in terms of format and layout was in most cases inappropriate or inflexible.

A notable exception however was a book that Price discovered in the early 1990s, titled *Pig City Model Farm: A Handbook on Architecture and Agriculture* (Fig. 3). Price wrote a glowing critique of the book, which effectively summarized many of the ideas that he had developed in his earlier reviews. As his very last book review, it was a kind of distillation of the principles that had guided his dialogic approach to architectural discourse in general and architectural criticism in particular (Price, 1993). The book was the publication of an architectural diploma thesis that consisted of a twin scenario involving the production of pig meat and the design of a model pig farm wherein similarities and mutual dependencies were brought to light for critical reflection. The first strength of the book that Price noted was its challenge to the conventional idea of a “thesis”. Price quoted the author Rob Kovitz’ first thesis

submission (which was rejected) in which he states:

I want to profess the implausibility of making a single sustained and systematic design argument. The unitary building project is not the reason for architecture, but its affect. It is an affect which is becoming less possible, less appropriate, and less defensible. It is a kind of utopia. (Kovitz quoted by Price, 1993: 99)

Price highlighted this basic premise by drawing attention to what he saw as the book’s second major strength, its open-ended form – a loose collection of quotations, images and projects – and its self-avowed non-linear approach. In his personal copy¹⁰, Price underlined a line from the author’s opening statement where this is made explicit, a quote from Günter Grass:

Hardly anything, believe me, is more depressing than going straight to the goal (Grass quoted by Price, 1993: 101).

For Price the book’s “thesis” had a strong “architectural” quality which he described as “its ‘containment’, in physical form, of a mix of ideas and images”. But ultimately it was the self-reflexive dimension that most attracted Price’s interest as both a critic and an author. As Price asserted:

Architectural theses should not merely explore a chosen field of theory or research, but in so doing should also provoke the reader to examine his attitude to or extend his knowledge of the subject. (Price, 1993: 101)

According to Price, the book’s fundamental merit was that it provided “an intelligent carpet-bag of opinions, views, comparisons, open-ended discussions and doubts” where the identification with the author’s intentions or position was less important than the practical effects, that is, “the reader’s using the piece with constructive greed as another tool with which to turn his own mind” (*ibid.*).

¹⁰ See Price’s notes in Bron and Hardingham (2006: 99).

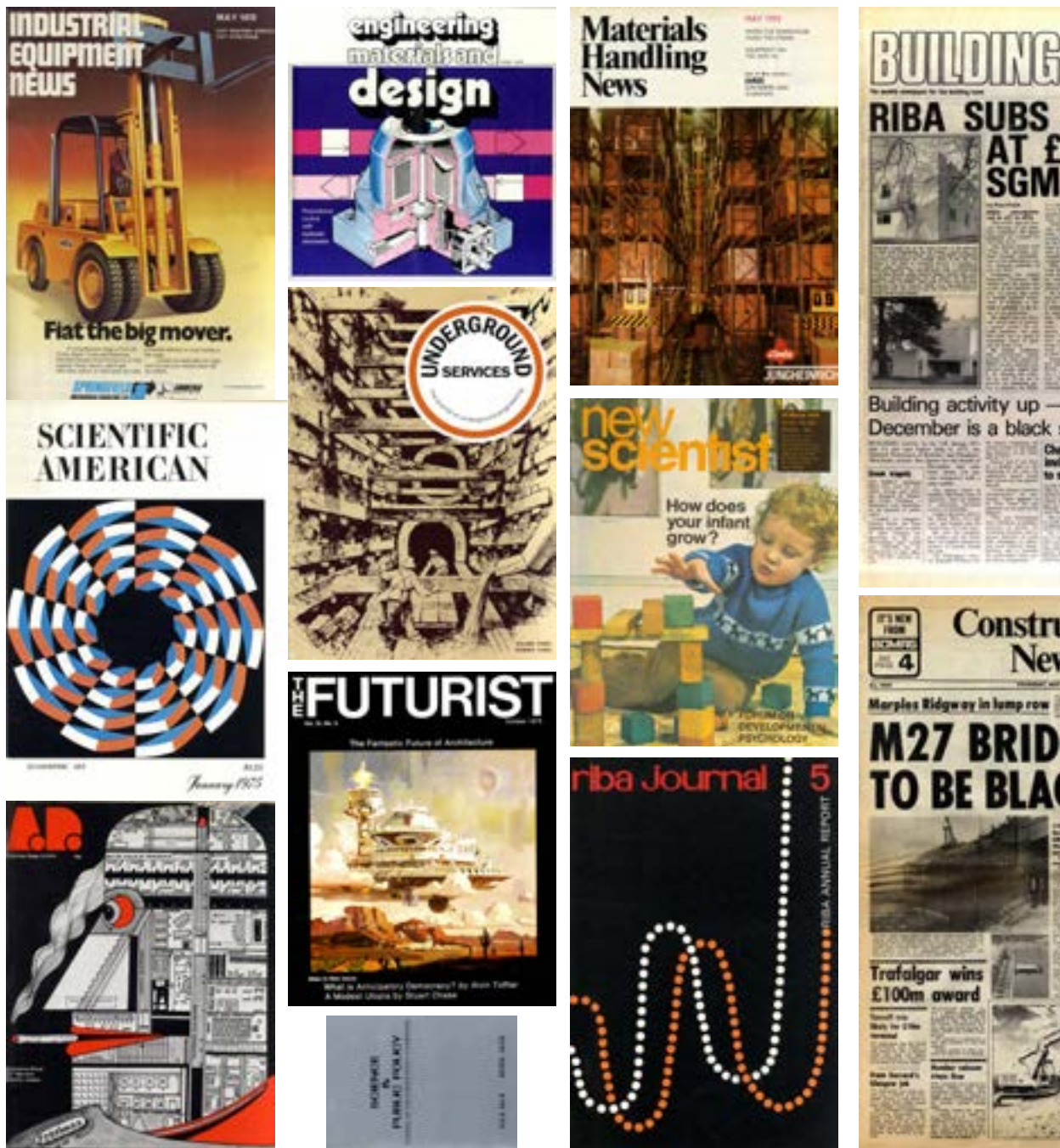
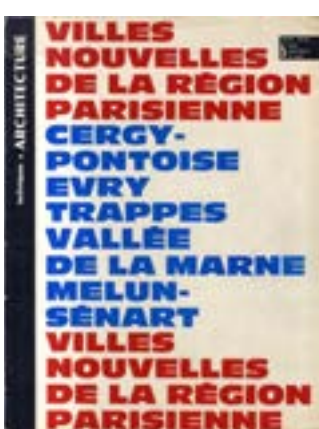
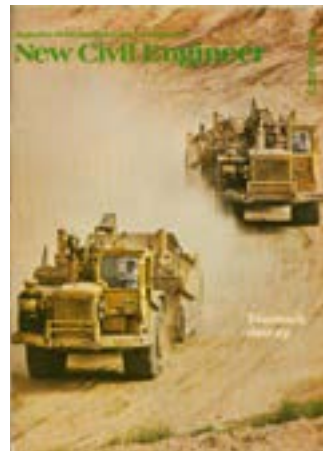


Fig. 2 Retooling the architectural imagination: *Architectural Magazines* presented by Cedric Price. Televised talk on TVAA, Architectural Association, London. Source: AA Files (2007, n° 55: 60-61). Elaboration and layout: J. Njoo, 2018.



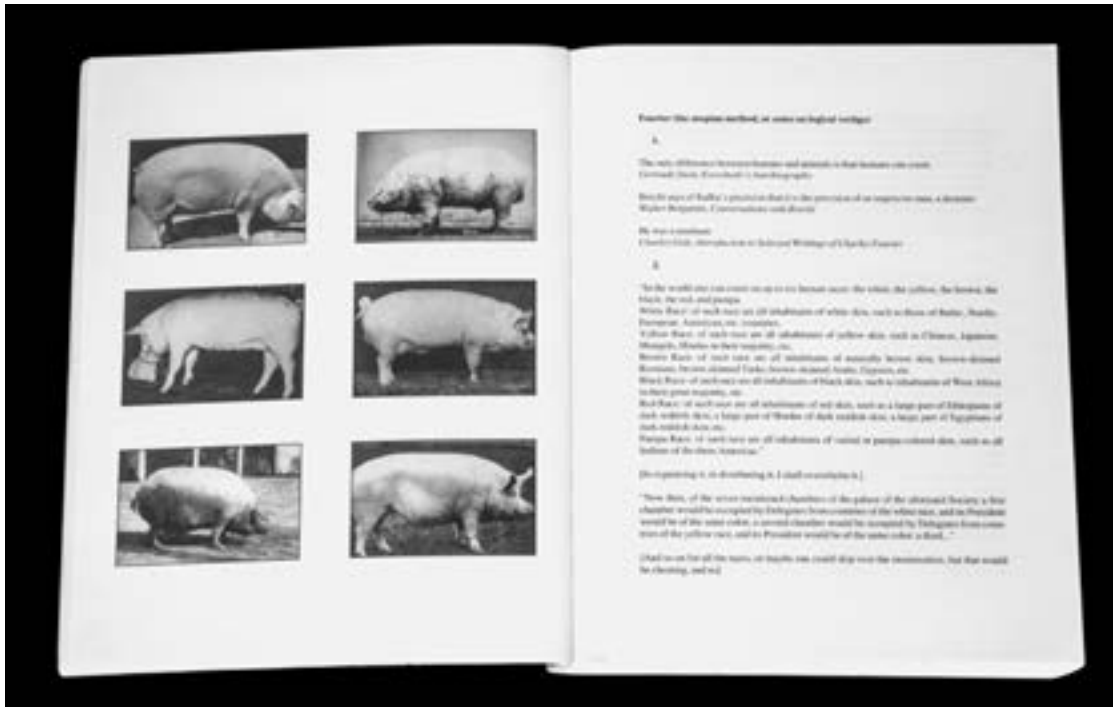


Fig. 3 "An intelligent carpet-bag of opinions, views, comparisons, open-ended discussions and doubts": Rob Kovitz, *Pig City Model Farm: A Handbook on Architecture and Agriculture*, 1992. Source: R. Kovitz.

This was the basic "thesis" underlying Price's dialogic method of criticism which his assorted objects of critique effectively served to clarify if not actually mirror.

The columnist as critic

The most productive vehicle however for Price's dialogic criticism was his writing as a columnist. Price ran eight successive columns, sometimes in multiple intervals, for two different London-based architectural journals over a period of almost twenty-five years, from 1975 to 1999¹¹. The column, as a recurring article or piece of opinion journalism in newspapers, is a feature of the post-war newspaper world. At the same time, its roots lie in the nineteenth century, the era that witnessed the birth of commercial news and the serial literature of Dickens, and that corresponded to a shift towards "softer"

forms of journalism or what was also known as "infotainment"; indeed, the first British columns consisted of collections of short stories (Williams, 2010). Increasingly over the twentieth century, however, columns also became known for their trenchant criticism, particularly of society and politics. One of the most successful columns of the twentieth century was the William Hickey column published in London's *Daily Express* starting in 1933. Named after an eighteenth century diarist and libertine, the column was produced anonymously by Tom Driberg who later became a Labour MP and Party Chairman, but who would also become a close friend and even a collaborator of Price, acting as the publicist for Price's celebrated Fun Palace project with theatre impresario Joan Littlewood during the 1960s¹². Driberg's column marked a turning point in column journalism due to its unusual mix of social gossip

11 Price ran eight columns in all: seven for *Building Design* (1975, 1976, 1977–1979, 1985–1986, 1990, 1992–1994, 1996) and a final series for *The Architects' Journal* (1998–1999).

12 It was Tom Driberg who introduced Price to Joan Littlewood (Littlewood, 1994: 415).

and critical political commentary, anticipating in effect the rise of soft news and feature articles that would become the hallmark of sixties newspaper journalism.

Price's first column series "The Heinz Extension" appeared in the weekly trade journal *Building Design* from 17 October to 20 November 1975 to coincide precisely with an exhibition of his drawings at the RIBA Heinz Gallery which was also accompanied by a personal lecture series. Like McLuhan's theory of media "extensions", which the architectural title of Price's column subtly references, this first experience as a columnist can be seen as part of a larger "conversation" as it were, that Price strategically synchronized to form an interconnected discursive network. As McLuhan argued, "no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media" (McLuhan, 1964a: 26). Price developed similar media exchanges on the occasion of subsequent exhibitions, programming on each occasion a new column and a new lecture series¹³.

Given Price's fondness for word play, it is quite possible that the notion of "extension" also had some meaning in relation to Price's involvement in continuing education or what was commonly known at the time as "extension lectures" addressed to a broad public ranging from high school students to old-age pensioners who often could not access higher education due to their social or economic status. In 1960, for example, Price was hired as an extension lecturer by University College of London and gave a semester course¹⁴ in the London suburb of Croydon on "Modern Architecture and Planning". An important part of his course involved discussion sessions after the lectures, some of them dealing with the local context and its future development. Significantly enough, Price kept some of the questions that he collected from his students in his personal office files.

In this regard, Price's columns can

be understood as part of a broader social and political agenda that sought to move architectural culture into closer interaction with society. But whereas his work in continuing education can be seen as a way of re-embedding architecture within a more egalitarian society, notably in the post-war context of the British welfare state, his work as an architectural columnist can be interpreted as something of the opposite: a way of re-embedding society within the discipline of architecture — a feature that distinguished Price's column writing from that of "public critics" like Mumford who clearly addressed a broader intellectual audience.

The architectural tabloid: repositioning architectural discourse

Building Design was not however an architectural magazine strictly speaking, but a building news and trade magazine addressed more broadly to the UK building industry. Another distinguishing feature was its frequency: *BD* came out on a weekly basis as opposed to the typical monthly intervals of professional architectural periodicals or the longer production cycles of academic journals. It was therefore more in tune with newspaper journalism, including the more intellectual left-wing political and social affairs weeklies like *New Statesman* or *New Society* to which Price and especially Banham contributed. It therefore had to be fast, responsive, and cheap, but also critical, knowledgeable, and informative. Unlike the counter-culture identity of *Architectural Design* during the 1960s to mid-1970s, which was also "low-cost" but closer to the spirit of experimental "little magazines" like *Archigram* or Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, *BD* had a very different model yet one which was perfectly coherent with Price's journalistic sensibility, namely the *tabloid*: a hybrid print genre somewhere between newspaper and magazine that came to epitomize the British popular press. Indeed, as Price described it, the value of *Building Design* was that it managed to retain its original identity as "a scurrilous gossip paper" while at the same time becoming "the nearest thing to an architectural design radio programme: Women's Hour, or something

13 See for example the exhibitions *Cedric Price Works II*, Architectural Association, 1984; and *Magnet*, Architectural Foundation, 1997.

14 See Price, "University of London Lectures", Cedric Price Fonds, DR2006:0088.

like that" (*Architectural Magazines*, 1975: 231).

The repositioning of *Building Design* as a "popular" architectural newspaper took place under the leadership of Peter Murray, a regular collaborator of Price. Before becoming editor of *BD* in 1975, Murray had formerly worked as artistic director and technical editor at *AD*, notably during the time of the "Cedric Price Supplement" series. As Murray explained in his contribution to the AA television programme in which Price reviewed his favourite magazines, *BD* was aimed at "producing fast news which is easy to read and can be thrown away easily afterwards". According to Murray, this was due to a staff composed primarily of professional journalists as opposed to architects (Price and himself being of course notable exceptions). Murray went on to praise the professional journalist's ability to "get stories out faster" avoiding "the obscure jargon of the profession". In his opinion, the trained journalist was better prepared to "condense and put into readable English" the full range of issues that needed to be covered in architectural news. In addition, journalists were able to reach a wider audience by being "less oriented to the incestuous London scene – as Murray put it – that tends to alienate a lot of readers outside of London". At the same time, Murray stressed that *BD*'s policy endeavoured to "bring to light the aspects... that will affect its readers rather than give just the straight coverage" (*ibid.*).

Criticism and correspondence

If journalism can be characterized in general by its reliance on multiple "voices", then Price's columns represent in a way a dramatization of this condition. In 1985, for example, Price began his fourth weekly column series for *BD* under the title "Starting Price" (Price, 1985–86). This new series had the singularity of being entirely devoted to letter correspondence with readers (Fig. 4). Undeniably letters fascinated Price. Reflecting on one of his favourite books, *The Natural History of Selbourne* (1789) by the reverend Gilbert White, Price speculated that it "achieved an excellence in that genre [i.e. history writing] possibly because it



Fig. 4 Epistolary dialogues: Cedric Price, "Starting Price". Source: *Building Design* (1985, n°5).

was not meant for public consumption but merely as a private commentary – in the form of numerous letters – to a friend whose opinions and comments White welcomed and respected" (Price, 1978: 63). Although column journalism does address itself to the public, one of its peculiarities is its ability to forge a sense of community and proximity with its readership through its regular correspondence with everyday events and actuality or, as in this case, letter correspondence.

An important precedent in this public form of epistolary dialogue was the English theorist, critic, and historian John Ruskin, whose writings Price greatly admired. From 1871 to 1884, Ruskin published a series of ninety-six public letters, *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, with the aim of stimulating critical motivated reading practices amongst the British working class. The form of the periodical letter, as print scholar Brian Maidment argues, marked "a definitive, and

culminating, stage in the development of Ruskin's polemical style... away from regarding a writer's work as a series of objects towards a sense of books as possible discourses or centres of activity and argument" (Maidment, 1981: 196)¹⁵.

Similar to Price, Ruskin explored the accessibility, immediacy, and economy of serial publication, and the use of different print genres for his arguments (*ibid.*: 197). At the same time, he perpetuated an epistolary tradition whose discursive power continued in nineteenth century England, notably in the expanding context of news periodicals (Palmegiano, 2012) and the tradition of political pamphleteering carried on by social commentators like William Cobbett, Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Thomas Carlyle (Stoddart, 1995). Drawing on these sources, Ruskin developed a sense of proximity with the social sphere of his readers very similar to Price's columns, publishing for example their letters, as well as those of the popular press with whom he also corresponded. In addition, as English scholar Judith Stoddart has highlighted, Ruskin's letters display a dexterity for moving from fact to fantasy and "blending the various modes of the discourse in order to question their difference" (Stoddart, 1995: 155). In *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin indeed mixes multiple "voices" such as political theory, fairy tales, and social gossip, anticipating to some extent Driberg's Hickey Column, and dramatizes his disjunctive narrative in the manner of a Dickens' serial novel. Through this discursive range and "aliveness", Ruskin attempted to reach a very different audience than the educated elite that constituted the core of his earlier readership. It was no longer simply a matter of *what* to write but to *whom* to write and *how* to best address this intended public.

Like Ruskin or Driberg, Price knitted together rather frivolous and serious matters in his columns. In one exchange, a reader writes to Price seeking advice on Christmas gifts for architects (the reader not being an

architect) to which Price responds with a list of suggestions according to personality and affiliation. Price also posted amusing questions or requests addressed to his readers. One line of enquiry concerned the source of a cast iron boot and shoe scraper that Price had purchased in the form of an existing nineteenth century English abbey. After thanking the reader who managed to provide him with an answer as well as another model, Price adds a note from his editor: ("*No more boot-scrappers please!*" – *Ed.*). Proximity was therefore not a synonym for consensus. Indeed, one of the defining traits of column journalists, unlike other news writers, is their relative editorial autonomy in the newsroom. Column writers were originally hired by newspapers in order to introduce a more subjective form of criticality and were even encouraged to mark their distance with respect to the prevailing editorial line of their proprietors.

Intermingled with such light-hearted matters, Price engaged with more urgent issues such as heritage protection, building economy, educational reforms, and (yes) architectural design, but always with a generous measure of critical wit and playfulness, much like Banham. One memorable critique concerns an exchange with British Telecom on the design of their new telephone booths which ends on a word of ironic flattery: "Finally, congrats on the yellow and black livery, such a welcome change from those bright red carbuncles which stood out a mile¹⁶". Like his editor, Price's readers were not always particularly conciliating. In one letter, a reader comments on the "appalling" standard of letters published in Price's column, and goes on to suggest that even Price could do better if he wrote them himself. Like all the letters published in Price's column, the reader's identity is only indicated by a set of initials and a simplified street address. Price's reaction — "A typically outrageous suggestion — no, Sir, no" — suggests that this is no stranger. Indeed, the reader in question was none other than

15 On similar issues of readership, see Rose (2014). For a more comprehensive analysis of *Fors Clavigera*, see Stoddart (1995).

16 Price (1985–1986: 383). "Phone boxes out of order".

Norman Willis, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and a dear friend of Price. In his final column, fittingly retitled “Closing Price”, Price lets his editor “unmask” Willis in good humour with the suggestion that perhaps he might be persuaded to begin a column shortly.¹⁷

But Willis’s provocation that “even Price could write better letters” is also an insider’s joke. As *BD* editor Paul Finch claims, no one ever did write in, Price invented all the questions himself.¹⁸ Price’s column was in this sense a fictional dialogue in the tradition of literary journalists like Dickens, Price’s favourite author.¹⁹ Fictional dialogue promotes a sense of involvement on the part of the reader. The published initials of the authors’ names and their simplified street addresses in Price’s columns are like clues in a detective novel. As literary scholar Bronwen Thomas argues, fictional dialogue aims to “create life in the reader” by posing a challenge, “not only in the sense of simply working out who is saying what to whom, but also in attempting to figure out what they mean and what their impact is for their interlocutors”. It asks the reader to actively participate and critically engage in the “(re) construction of meaning” (Thomas, 2012: viii). Literary journalism regained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s as a form of creative spectatorship and performance that draws on the idea of theatre as a defining metaphor. In this sense, Price’s columns can be seen as an effective “stage” for the continuous agonistic “play” that is contemporary society, and in which the world of architecture inevitably participates.

Conclusion: the relative autonomies of architectural criticism

Price treated public opinion as a necessary input into architectural design and the development of a critical practice. However, he did not view this as being antithetical to the development of disciplinary “autonomy”. On the contrary, Price multiplied and differentiated his various publics: professionals and non-professionals, architects and non-architects, at times woven together and at other times kept apart for comparison. By adopting a dialogic approach that did not aim at synthesis or consensus, Price admitted a degree of “autonomy” in his discourse that he adapted according to his different interlocutors. Price practised criticism as a dialogic process and as a form of agency directed towards critical self-empowerment – “an intelligent carpet bag of opinions, views, comparisons, open-ended discussions and doubts... with which to turn [one’s] own mind” (Price, 1993: 101). In the case of Price, the architectural critic is therefore not a detached “autonomous” observer who maintains a critical “distance” from the “participants” (i.e. society) but on the contrary, an “embedded intellectual” closer to what Bruno Latour evocatively characterizes as “the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (Latour, 2004: 246).

17 *Ibid.* (385, 388). “Brotherly guidance” and “Closing Price”.

18 Interview with Paul Finch (*Cedric Price Memory Bank*, 2014).

19 On literary journalism see Keeble and Wheeler (2007).

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