

**Future
Architecture
Platform**

Archifutures

The Studio

**A field guide
to the future
of architecture**

Edited by &beyond



Occupy Facebook!



**New spaces
for architecture
criticism**

**By Davide Tommaso
Ferrando**

Occupy Facebook!
New spaces for architecture criticism

By Davide Tommaso Ferrando

Occupy Facebook!

Torino

“Architecture critics should approach social media as communication spaces that are ready to be occupied and hijacked.”

“The medium is the message”: as social media continues to reduce architecture to copy-pasted content, the Turin-based architecture critic Davide Tommaso Ferrando lays out his own manifesto to hijack the networks and create a new space for erudite architecture criticism.

“Revolutions have always been linked to new media and communication formats.”

Beatriz Colomina¹

What convinces me that I have to keep doing what I do – which is: exploring new forms of architecture criticism by experimenting with the communication tools provided by social media – is that in twenty years time, apparently, the vast majority of publications based on non-critical thinking, from news to narrative, will be written by robots.² From the point of view of content production this won't change much of the current panorama of architecture communication, dominated as it is by freelance editors copy-pasting (or in the best cases, re-elaborating) press releases sent by future famous architects.³ But in terms of occupation, to paraphrase Thomas H. Davenport and Julia Kirby, being “capable of more big picture thinking and a higher level of abstraction than computers are”⁴ will probably be the only option for keeping a job in the field of architecture writing, which is more or less the opposite of what is happening today.

As a matter of fact, since the last decade of the twentieth century, critical thinking in the wider frame of architectural culture has been marginalised, a process that can be traced back to several interconnected causes.

Davide Tommaso Ferrando

Davide Tommaso Ferrando is an architecture critic, editor, curator and educator, particularly interested in the intersections between architecture, city and media. He is editor in chief of *O11+* and an editor of *Viceversa*. He also teaches as adjunct professor in the Schools of Architecture of Torino, Ferrara and Madrid as well as being a guest lecturer at several European institutions.

Previous page © Davide Tommaso Ferrando

1 Ethel Baraona Pohl, César Reyes, “[From Xerography to HTML](#)”, in *MAS Context* #9, Spring 2011, p. 14-25

2 Steven Levy, [Can an algorithm write a better news story than a human reporter?](#), in *Wired*, 24 April 2012 (accessed 28 June 2016)

3 Sam Jacob, [How to become a famous architect](#), in *Strange Harvest* (accessed 28 June 2016)

4 Thomas H. Davenport, Julia Kirby, [Beyond automation](#), in *Harvard Business Review*, June 2015 (accessed: 28 June 2016)

Among these is the rise of so-called “Post-Critical” practices⁵, which focus on professional pragmatism rather than theoretical speculation; the acceleration of urbanisation processes around the world, which discouraged dissent in favour of the opportunistic praise of starchitecture’s top-products; and the proliferation of blogs, webzines and self-publishing platforms, which have turned the editorial ecosystem upside down by dramatically shrinking the market for architecture magazines, where critical writing is traditionally exercised (and paid for).

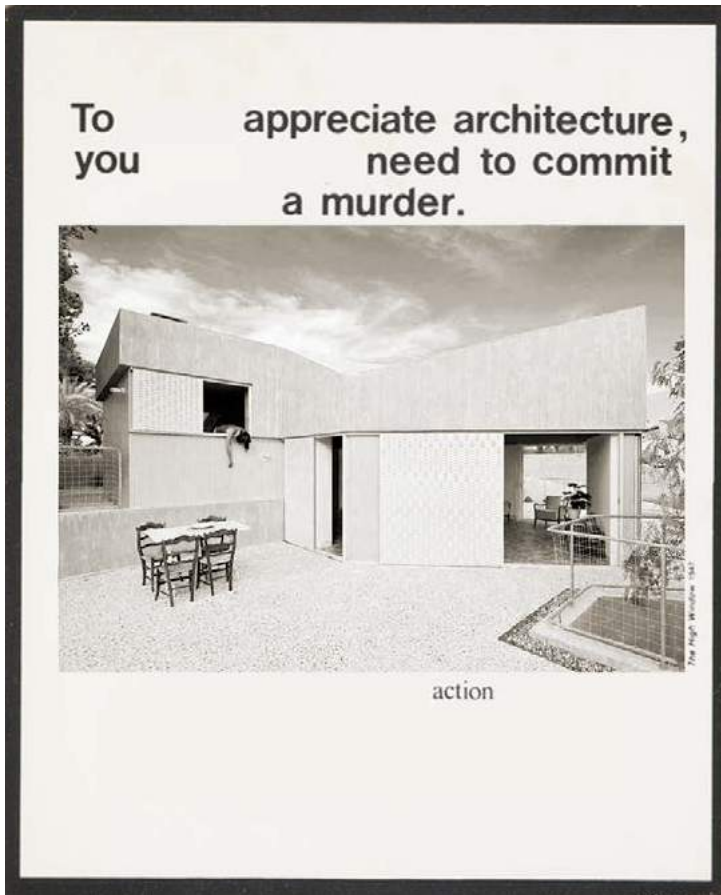
Nevertheless, following the 2008 financial crash, a mixed feeling of guilt and anger for the way in which architecture had subjugated itself to the laws of real estate – basically behaving as an acritical partner in the construction of the bubble – seems to have stimulated a new wave of interrogations into the need, role and condition of architecture criticism today. This in turn led to a proliferation of articles, magazines, books, seminars, academic courses and other kinds of initiatives meant to explore this urgent issue from a variety of standpoints. It is in the context of this renewed attention towards architecture criticism as an object of inquiry that, since 2010, I have been independently investigating the conditions for its reproduction on social platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram.

There are several reasons why I have taken on such a specific line of research. Firstly, I share a sincere interest in all manifestations of contemporaneity, which allows me to approach the phenomenon of social media, which Umberto Eco condemned as “giving legions of idiots the same right to speak as a Nobel prize winner”,⁶ in the same way as Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

⁵ Mark Jarzombek, *Critical or Post-Critical?*, in *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol. 7, n.1, April 2002, p. 149-151.

⁶ Umberto Eco: *Con i social parola a legioni di imbecilli*, in *La Stampa*, 10 June 2015 (accessed 29 June 2016).

approached Las Vegas: suspending judgment so as to be able to *learn* from it. Moreover, being a frequent user of these platforms, I have direct experience of their functions, which allows me to ground my research in both theoretical speculation and empirical observation.



Architectures for
Advertisement - *To appreciate
architecture you need to commit
a murder.* © Davide Tommaso
Ferrando

A second, more pragmatic reason has to do with numbers. According to the *Digital in 2016* report⁷, there are more than 2.3 billion users of social media around the world (393 million in Europe alone), who spend an average of two hours per day on these platforms. Not only are

⁷ *Digital in 2016*

we talking about a huge – and constantly growing – potential readership, but these figures also show how communication on social media is a globally relevant phenomenon, transforming our daily routine and redefining the way in which we consume digital content. In this context it makes sense to consider the position of architecture criticism and its capacity to deal with this changing condition.

A third, related reason is that social media is progressively taking over websites as the main access door to the internet. Thanks to the fact that their content directly reaches readers via their social media feeds, rather than needing to be searched for, the traditional relationship between the subject and the object of information has been diverted, if not completely inverted⁸. This marks a turning point in the history of content production and consumption: not only because, as Emily Bell writes, “Social media hasn’t just swallowed journalism, it has swallowed everything”,⁹ but also because “we are beginning to explore a media architecture that ventures into unfamiliar territory”¹⁰ according to Jeff Jarvis.

One last reason is that publishing on social media finally gives architecture critics the chance to communicate not only with academics, students and practicing architects – something significant in itself, giving the latter’s supposed reluctance to read¹¹ – but also with people who are strangers to the discipline. Owing to the capacity of social platforms to make their content travel through networks of related users by means of likes and shares there is an, as yet, unknown field of possibilities opening up and facilitating the cross-pollination of imaginaries and discourses. After all, what is criticism supposed to do, if not establishing a dialogue with society at large?

⁸ Which is why an exponentially growing number of web magazines are now turning to Instant Articles, a service that allows to publish complex contents (long texts, videos, images, etc) directly inside of the Facebook environment, with a layout that is specifically designed for the screen of a smartphone.

⁹ Emily Bell, *Facebook is eating the world*, in Columbia Journalism Review, 7 March 2016 (accessed 03 July 2016)

¹⁰ Jeff Jarvis, *What if Content could Come to You Rather than Making You Go to Content?*, in Observer, 14 October 2014 (accessed 03 July 2016)

¹¹ Allison Arieff, *Why don’t we read about architecture?*, in *The New York Times*, 2 March 2012 (accessed 05 July 2016) opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/why-dont-we-read-about-architecture/

If it is true that social platforms are becoming the leading environment for communication, then I believe they pose an urgent challenge to architecture critics. Critics should try to understand their potential so as to be able to take advantage of it – not only because their readership is otherwise condemned to shrink, but also because social platforms function according to specific rules, which make them incapable of hosting many of the traditional products of architecture criticism, such as the long essay. The fact that we still have to discover what can and what can't be done with these tools, suggests that we now live in a period in which the methods for the production and dissemination of architecture criticism can be redefined from scratch, which is actually quite exciting.

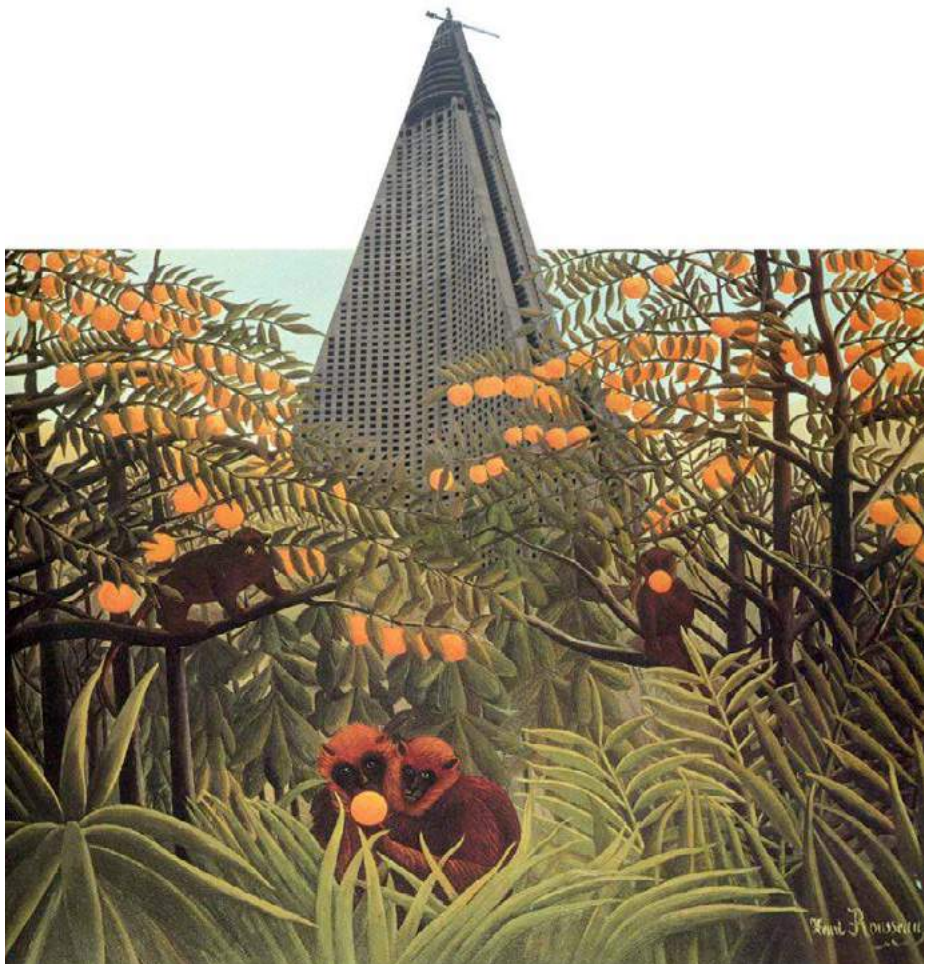
**“No vacations,
no selfies, no jokes,
no cats...”**

But how can social media be efficaciously turned into instruments for architecture criticism, given that they are evidently clearly designed for different purposes, such as “communicating with other people and making friends”?¹² Since the beginning of my research, I have experimented with different formats and processes on my social accounts, which have allowed me to identify a first set of strategies that offer a temporary and partial answer to this question. These are:

¹² According to the [Cambridge Dictionary](#) (accessed 10 July 2016)

Avoid personal use

It may sound as paradoxical, given the nature of these media, but on my social accounts I exclusively publish content that is related to architecture. No vacations, no selfies, no jokes, no cats... nothing linked to my life outside of architecture ever enters them. This is for two very simple reasons: first, not to fall into the trap of narcissism and self-indulgence, which distances critics from their real task; second, not to provide sensitive data that can



Displacements,
May 2012
© Davide
Tommaso
Ferrando

be scrutinised, processed and eventually sold to private companies, which is how Zuckerberg and co. make money out of their users.¹³



Average communication on social platforms is fragmented, inconsistent and undersigned. It often fails to last longer than the instant in which it occurs. What I do, on the contrary, is to develop proper editorial projects on these media, by controlling all aspects of production and dissemination of my contents, behaving as writer, editor and publisher at the same time. In order to achieve this goal, I have given myself a detailed protocol of use for each platform, establishing routines in terms of number of posts per week, organisation of text and image for each post, thematic relations between the posts etc.¹⁴ This is intended to give order and a recognisable character to the way in which I post. In other words, I have invented an editorial style by defining the limits of my social networking.

13 Of course I still get the ads, but at least they are all related to architecture...

Displacements, June 2012.
© Davide Tommaso Ferrando

***Think in terms
of an editorial project***

14 Nicolas Cole, *The 1 Painful Obvious Reason Nobody Follows You on Social Media*, in Inc., 7 July 2016 (accessed 08 July 2016).

Be synthetic

15 [The 2012 Survey](#)

16 Christopher Hooton, [Our attention span is now less than that of a goldfish](#), Microsoft study finds, in Independent, 13 May 2015 (accessed 08 July 2016).

17 Kevan Lee, [The Proven Ideal Length of Every Tweet, Facebook Post, And Headline Online](#), in Fastcompany, 04 July 2014 (accessed 08 July 2016).

Architecture criticism on social media has no choice but to be fast and effective given that, according to the 2012 survey *Imagining the Internet*,¹⁵ smartphones have catapulted us into a world of “instant gratification and quick fixes [leading to a] loss of patience and a lack of deep thinking”.¹⁶ Only bite-size texts can survive an audience whose average attention span is shorter than that of a goldfish. If it is true that the ideal length of a Facebook post is less than 40 characters,¹⁷ one can’t help wondering whether the possibility to generate architecture criticism on these fast-consumption platforms actually exists at all.



Five Cuban doors I liked very much, door 4. © Davide Tommaso Ferrando

One strategy that I adopt in order to solve the riddle is to write texts that are organised in paragraphs of 100-200 words, which can be isolated and posted separately as sequential, serialised fragments of longer articles. This not only grants a wider readership to the published posts, given their reduced reading time, but also stimulates curiosity and therefore attention¹⁸ for the ones that are still to be published.



In the racing and distracted environment of social media, being able to work with images has become fundamental, given that visual content tends to be processed much faster, grabs the readers' attention much better, and has the potential to travel much further, than the written word. Such a condition perfectly fits the structure of architectural knowledge, which has always been heavily based on images and is therefore particularly suitable for communication on social media. Apart from systematically accompanying my texts with drawings or photographs, I often adopt the technique of collage in order to produce images that are meant to express a critical message autonomously or, at most, in association with brief

18 About the importance of attention for communication on social media, it is necessary to quote Artie Vierkant, according to whom: "for the new hierarchies of many-to-many production the cultural status of objects is now influenced entirely by the attention given to them, the way they are transmitted socially and the variety of communities they come to inhabit". See: Artie Vierkant, *The Image Object Post-Internet*, 2010

Left & right: My humble tribute to Ai Weiwei. © Davide Tommaso Ferrando

Revert to visual language

19 Davide Tommaso Ferrando, *Keeping it (un)real. Behind the facade of starchitect video marketing*, in *uncube*, 12 April 2016 (accessed 10 July 2016).

20 *Cisco Visual Networking Index: Forecast and Methodology, 2015-2020*

captions so as to experiment with the potential of visual language. More recently, I have also started to produce short film clips¹⁹ that cross architecture criticism with video communication, in order to catch up with a trend that, according to Cisco, will account for 69 percent of all consumer internet traffic by 2017.²⁰



UHNWICity - London.
© Davide Tommaso Ferrando

Build up your community

Social media platforms allow architecture critics the possibility to design not only the way in which their content is produced and distributed, but also the people they communicate with. In this sense, carefully selecting the contacts of my social networks has become an essential part of my critical labours, since it defines the scientific community I am part of – or in other words, the peers of my critical labour. At the same time, making sure

that my social feed only receives updates from users who post interesting contents, has transformed my social feeds in continuously updated sources of useful information: a spontaneous, collective architecture magazine. Not to mention the intrinsic directness and informality of social media, which on several occasions has allowed me to collaborate with many interesting people I have yet to meet in real life: people that share with me more references and objectives than most of my friends and colleagues here in Turin, Italy. How promising is that?!

To sum up: architecture critics should approach social media as communication spaces²¹ that are ready to be occupied and hijacked. It is not simply a matter of visibility and outreach, but rather a necessity to explore the new ways in which critical discourse can be constructed nowadays. Social platforms won't be a substitute for books, magazines, fanzines and webzines; they simply can't, because they are structured to host different kinds of formats and contents. Still, they exist and they are here to stay, therefore we need to include them in the ecosystem of media that shapes architectural culture, making sure that they are used in useful rather than wasteful ways. In 2013, Beatriz Colomina stated that "most of what happens in blogs and so forth is not very critical"²²: it is true, but I believe that the problem has to do with the fact that the message hasn't been adapted to the medium yet. ■

21 Patrick G. T. Healey, Graham White, Arash Eshghi, Ahmad J. Reeves & Ann Light, *Communication Spaces*, in *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* #17 (2-3), April 2008, p. 169-193.

22 Niki Kalms, Ari Seligmann, *Beatriz Colomina: Paper Architecture*, in *Architecture AU*, 16 April 2013 (accessed 11 July 2016).