

Dalibor Vesely and the criticism of architecture
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I am sitting in the Patisserie Valerie in the Norman Foster extension to St Pancras station, having just travelled in 18 minutes on the high speed rail link from Ebbsfleet in Kent where, as part of my job as an architectural writer, I have been researching George Osborne's claims to be building a "garden city". It is not – rather a series of developers' housing estates strung along access roads between the hefty infrastructure of the railway and huge poetic-kitsch shopping mall of Bluewater.

Earlier today I have finished writing my appreciation of the late Zaha Hadid, in which I quote the assessment by Peter Cook (the architect) of her Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku as "a dream-like space, with its totality ... seeming to have come from a vocabulary that lies so far beyond the normal architecture that we assess or rationalize". There is melancholy here, that a petro-dictator's 3-D propaganda should be considered the highest expression of architecture and the best use of Hadid's abilities.

So there is little evidence in all this that Dalibor's teaching has had much effect, rather that the fragmentation he opposed has intensified. Transport engineering, home, retail and architectural genius are each given discrete and disconnected compartments. Then there is my precise location. Dalibor's students' collective projects often used to include bookshops and cafes, on the grounds that these were refuges of the sort of spatial wholeness that was deserting other urban situations. When I was a student there was only one Patisserie Valerie, in Soho, and it exemplified Dalibor's idea, but in the intervening decades cafes and bookshops have themselves become commodified, as chains like Costa or Borders – and then in the case of bookshops they became the non-spatial Amazon. Pat Val became a chain too, and the wicker chairs gathered awkwardly under Foster's concrete do not engender the convivial and interactive multiplicity that we aimed for in the cafes in the student projects, or was achieved in the Soho original.

Thanks to Dalibor, however, and to speak first of myself, I am at least able to interpret what I witness. He stands somewhere behind my elbow in most things I write, in the shape of his insistence that architecture is cultural, social, poetic, political and economic. This is a somewhat general statement, and Dalibor himself would scrutinise each of these terms in detail and invest them with highly specific meanings – meanings which don't always survive the crudeness of journalism – but this insight enables me to offer an alternative to versions of reality often considered normal and self-evident in architectural criticism: the stylistic, the art-historical, the aesthetic, the formal, the personal epiphany, the technological.

In my career I have lived through the period of style wars, in which one was pushed to take sides between Prince Charles's clumsy traditionalism and the clumsy modernist reaction to it. One favoured the latter, as having on its side greater integrity, creative energy and hope for the future, but in doing so gave an answer to the wrong question. There followed, during the 1990s, a period when leading critics alternated between two preferred terms of praise, "elegant" and

“spectacular”, depending on whether they were describing a lean piece of Foster engineering, or a curvaceous bit of Foster form-making. Since the 1980s, and *Blueprint's* innovation of putting glamorous portraits on the front cover, there has also been the phenomenon of personality-based architectural coverage which evolved into that of the starchitect.

So, now, I take encouragement from the fact that some writers are taking a broader, deeper and richer view of urban and architectural space, some of them newspaper critics, others writers of books, some both, but in all cases part of an accessible public discourse. Some are directly the result of Dalibor's teaching; others are not, but manifestations of a more general climate to which he contributed. I would cite Anna Minton's critiques of what passes for public space in contemporary cities, and Owen Hatherley's denunciations of the landscapes of regeneration. Carolyn Steel, directly inspired by Dalibor, gives flesh to this thinking through exploring the spatiality of food.

Oliver Wainwright, Edwin Heathcote and Ellis Woodman all write on architecture with what might be called a cultural consciousness, as does someone from outside the business but with a keen interest in it, Will Self. Jonathan Meades is from the personal-epiphany school but uses it as route to describe a particular version of architectural poetry. For myself, I find that I am supported and encouraged more than ever by my employers to write about built space as I believe it should.

The bigger question is whether these kinds of critical understanding contribute to or are at least accompanied by changes to the ways buildings and urban spaces are made. Or whether, to cite Meades citing Peter Cook (the comedian), they are effective in the same way that the Weimar satirists' warnings prevented Hitler coming to power. If, for example, I go outside from my table at Patisserie Valerie, I might find cause for qualified optimism in the redevelopment of King's Cross, a place on which ex-students of Dalibor's Cambridge, as employees of some of the practices involved, have had some influence. It is also an outcome of the more general rediscovery of “the city” in the 1970s and 80s, to which Dalibor was a particularly insightful contributor.

The optimism comes from development's understanding of some rudiments of urban space: that it is a vessel for civic life in which buildings are contributory elements rather than individual objects, and in which such things as nature and history also play their part. In these respects it is a significantly better project than its equivalent might have been in 1980. The qualification comes from the shallowness with which these principles are realised – the levels of reciprocity of which Dalibor talked are lacking. Also from the possibility that King's Cross might turn out to be a high point, setting a level below which future developments will fall.

There have also been, in the last three decades, the development of practices who share some of Dalibor's awareness and in some cases were influenced by similar intellectual traditions. Again, influence is both direct and not. Space doesn't permit elaboration but, to simplify, they are concerned with the idea of

the situation, issues of fragmentation and alienation, the possibilities of wholeness in the contemporary world. In some cases – that of Rem Koolhaas, for example – a comparable diagnosis to Dalibor’s leads to a different prescription, to express more than heal the void. I’d also mention, in a very much non-exhaustive list, Witherford Watson Mann, Patrick Lynch, Haworth Tompkins, Eric Parry, Herzog and de Meuron, David Chipperfield, Caruso St John, muf, Assemble, Tony Fretton, David Kohn, FAT, Christ and Gantenbein, OFFICE Gers van Severen. There is Mark Brearley, both in his former work for the mayor of London, and in his critiques, with Jane Clossick, of the regeneration of Tottenham.

I cannot in all honesty say that this is an auspicious moment, as the modest gains of recent decades are endangered by particularly virulent ideas of market-led production. I can also sense Dalibor shudder from the other side as I mention a few of these names, as their correspondence with his thinking is far from close. But there are currents of thought and practice, some of them due to his direct influence, which contribute to an understanding of cities and buildings very different from that when Dalibor started teaching, and which will contribute to the future in ways we can’t yet know.