

Success or failure?

Success and failure are slippery categories, especially in architecture. While inhabitants of buildings are quick to complain of functional problems, they rarely notice when spaces and structures work well. Equally, commercial success – measured conventionally in terms of profit – rarely equates to critical success (with a few notable exceptions). The fickle priorities of critical success, anyway, shift unpredictably in the cross-currents of fashion and historiography. And changing orthodoxies also influence the reception of a building: deep plan, artificially-lit and mechanically-ventilated spaces are no longer as desirable as they were forty years ago. So too can changing technologies: tens of millimetres of difference in floor-to-ceiling height between office floorplates can influence the building services which can be usefully accommodated and can turn a commercially viable structure into one deemed worthy of demolition. The factors which transform success into failure, and vice-versa, remain manifold, subtle and unpredictable.

Timothy Brittain-Catlin, in this issue of *arq* (pp. 139–147), discusses the career of the Edwardian architect Horace Field. He outlines the ‘downward trajectory’ of Field’s career from initial critical and commercial success to relative obscurity. The architect’s gentle Queen Anne classicism – popular with banks and railway companies in the 1920s and much copied – fell from favour, he argues, as the particular virtues of English reserved moderation which it mirrored also fell from favour. Fernando Luis Lara, meanwhile (pp. 131–138), reviews early modernist social housing in Brazil. He recounts how radical social priorities became tempered by more conservative class and gender configurations, and how buildings imagined as the beginnings of a modern city became isolated objects. These ‘incomplete utopias’, which remain of critical interest, now stand as monuments to the complexities of success and failure.

Elsewhere in this issue, Frank van der Hoeven (pp. 177–187), from the TU Delft Faculty of Architecture, discusses successive attempts by Dutch authorities to measure the success or failure of architectural research. He outlines the shifting priorities of three measurement exercises and their relative outcomes. The success or failure of research is of particular interest in at present in the UK, in the context of the coalition Government’s radical intervention in Universities. Their emphasis on the immediate measurable impact of research on policy and society – and their concentration of research funding into themes aligned with Government priorities – will have significant influence on academic freedom and opportunities for creativity in research. The German broadsheet *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* recently anticipated that this approach will effectively end British academic research of any global quality in the humanities and other disciplines. Will the coalition’s controlling framework succeed? This depends, of course, on how you choose to assess success or failure.

THE EDITORS

Note

1. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ.NET) <<http://www.faz.net/s/Rub5C2BFD49230B472BA96E0B2CF9FAB88C/Doc~E63813C26AA72449DA1E0CA76FD10DA50~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>> [Accessed: 01.07.11]

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