Ada Louise Huxtable, 1921–2013

On the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic.

The architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable was 91 when she died last month. As she noted in a recollection in our memorial issue for Hilton Kramer last May, her first piece of criticism was written for Hilton when he was editing The Art Digest in the 1950s. Indefatigable till the end, her last published piece appeared in The Wall Street Journal, where she had been architecture critic since 1997, in December. In between, Ada Louise had carved out a distinguished career as a critic and as a custodian of the built environment. In 1965, after the demolition of McKim, Mead & White’s magnificent Penn Station two years earlier, she helped found the New York City Landmarks Preservation. (“Not,” she noted at the time, “that Penn Station is the Parthenon, but it might as well be because we can never again afford a nine-acre structure of superbly detailed travertine, any more than we could build one of solid gold. It is a monument to the lost art of magnificent construction.”) From 1963 to 1982, she was architecture critic for The New York Times. Together, she and Hilton raised the standard of criticism in that paper to a level it had not seen before or has since. Ada Louise helped reinvigorate the vocation of architecture criticism, elevating...
it to a seriousness it had not enjoyed since the heyday of Montgomery Schuyler in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1970, Ada Louise was awarded the first-ever Pulitzer Prize in criticism, thus demonstrating that even the Pulitzer Committee sometimes gets it right.

Ada Louise did not agree with Hilton about politics, and she was certainly at odds with aspects of The New Criterion’s editorial stance. But about questions of aesthetic substance, she was at one with the magazine. We fondly recall the long afternoon we spent watching a screening of Robert A. M. Stern’s inadvertently comical paean to postmodernism, “Pride of Place.” And in 1982, The New Criterion’s first season, Ada Louise published a 16,000-word extract from her most important book, The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered (1984), a brilliant inquiry into the social and aesthetic significance of our era’s iconic architectural innovation, the skyscraper. “Like other arts,” she noted, architecture has not been free from the ideological politics, cliques, and skillful and often venomous ad hominem attacks that are a curious and constant part of the art world. This fact has never been more obvious than it is in architecture today. There is a kind of guerrilla intellectual warfare operating from academia to the media, motivated by something that is unique to architecture—the direct connection between the bases of power and extremely lucrative work. Nowhere are the battlelines more clearly drawn than on the skyline. The modernist-postmodernist camps are in hand-to-hand, building-to-building, polemic-to-polemic combat on a huge scale, the postmodernists as intent on breaking rules and heads as on pursuing artistic frontiers. The script is familiar. Heroes are turned into villains, and the overthrow of the old regime is accompanied by the savaging of its leaders and the ravages of cultural revolution. The sound of smashing idols is everywhere.

Ada Louise Huxtable was a canny, amusing, and historically literate chronicler of those struggles. We will miss her. RIP.