

Heterotopia and Identity: Regionalism, Culture, and Craft

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THE INVESTIGATION OF THE LOCAL IS THE CONDITION FOR REACHING THE CONCRETE AND THE REAL, AND FOR REHUMANIZING ARCHITECTURE.

—Alexander Tzonis and Liane Le faivre, *Architecture in Greece*

Critical Regionalism and the Vernacular Landscape

Well before Kenneth Frampton published “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism” architects were tapping regional and cultural influences for built form. The return to sources precipitated by a renewed interest in regionalism was spurred, in part, by less known agendas contained within the aegis of Modernism. According to William J. R. Curtis modern architecture was typically portrayed as a “monolithic and determinist entity without subtle internal dimensions or varying preoccupations and traditions of its own.”¹ Modern architecture stressed links to modern technology, to progressive social thought and to the ideal of a modern machine age. It was based on a historicist model that presumed a *Zeitgeist* at the heart of the historical and cultural process striving for a holistic expression of visual form. Curtis recognizes that if the modern movement involved forward-looking utopian myths concerning the dawning of a new age, it also involved radical ideals with the return to fundamentals.

“Post-modernist” dogma presumes that abstraction involves divorce from the past, but in actuality modernism sought to formulate an architectural language with the depth and rigor of the great styles of the past. Thus, for some modernist architects, according to Curtis, abstraction became a device through which the artist enters the past on a number of levels simultaneously and then transforms its lessons into an authentic form in the present.

Frampton attempts to differentiate critical regionalism from vernacular building:

“The term critical regionalism is not intended to denote the vernacular, as this was once spontaneously produced by the combined interaction of climate, culture, myth and craft, but rather to identify those recent regional “schools” whose aim has been to represent and serve, in a critical sense, the limited constituencies in which they are grounded. Such a regionalism depends, by definition, on a connection between the political consciousness of a society and the profession.”² [Italics are mine.]

The operative idea, of course, is that in order for regionalism to be critical in the first place, it must have a political agenda.

This requires a notion of the self-referential or reflective bias of architecture (particularly modern architecture) which simultaneously looks inward at its own internal processes and manipulations as well as outwardly assuming a worldview. This presents a dilemma for the architect who, in seeking to be modern is required to be universal and global in outlook, but at the same time tries to adhere to local culture, values, and traditions. As the philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out:

“The phenomena of universalization, while being as advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also of...the creative nucleus of great civilizations and great cultures...the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind.”³

Thus the architect is presented with a paradox: “In order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past.”⁴

Ricoeur’s thesis is that a hybrid world culture will only be realized through cross-fertilization between rooted culture on the one hand and universal civilization on the other. This paradoxical proposition, that regional culture must also be a form of world culture, is predicated on the notion that development will, of necessity, transform the basis of rooted culture. However, we have also discovered, in most cases belatedly, that modernization and particularly industrialization not only transforms rooted culture, it often destroys it.

In “Thoughts on the New Rural Landscape” Robert B. Riley writes that the rural landscape in the U.S. has been a story of rapid change: the development of a whole continent on mostly agricultural or extractive lines, within the two or three centuries during which agriculture itself, in all advanced countries, was rapidly changing and evolving. This change, however, is inevitable since it marks the progress of a nation from underdevelopment of its natural resources to full utilization. The gradual transformation of the landscape from wild nature to agrarian countryside was, for the most part, progressive and incremental. These changes also brought a sense of order and hierarchy that could be understood in traditional terms. As Paul Heyer points out this sense of natural order is pervasive:

“In the natural landscape order embraces the total process of origination, development, and disintegration. The ecological process is one of relationships changing, growing, and self-generating where there is a unity, even an ambiguity. In an outward chaos of forms one senses an underlying order.”⁵

Riley is not concerned about the changes that have trans-

formed the agrarian landscape from production by hand and animal labor to the machine. These are changes that are expected. What concerns him most is the conversion of farmland to residences or for urban expansion and the attendant ecological problems generated by erosion and siltation, draining and development of wetlands, and the proliferation of suburbia.

“The old rural landscape was not just a physical, social and economic phenomenon. It was a conceptual image, an unexamined, shared vision of the countryside. It was economically, socially, and visually organized around people living on the land and earning a living from the land, particularly through agriculture and some extractive land uses. Few people who didn’t live from the land lived on the land. It had a basic conceptual and hierarchical organization – city, town, village, hamlet, free-standing farmstead, and, finally, wild land. Economically, it was organized hierarchically and centrally as well, with functions and markets linked to settlements.”⁷⁶

Pierce Lewis coined the term Galactic City to describe a new urban form of city that can’t be understood at all in terms of the old city, but only in terms of itself, and noted its expansion into the countryside.⁷⁷ The new old rural landscape was a place where people worked on the land, earned their living from the land, and lived on that land. The new rural landscape is a residence and occasional workplace for people whose livelihood depends not at all upon the land per se. People to whom the rural landscape is nothing more or nothing less than an alternative residential location, at least in the U.S., are shaping the new nonurban landscape.

Traditional concepts of city, town, village, hamlet, farmstead, and wild have little relevance to this new landscape and this new way of life according to Riley. As Lewis observes, our habit of constantly trying to interpret the new landscape in terms of the old city is not only futile, but actively hinders understanding. The new landscape is one in which traditional concepts of central place and hierarchical organization are meaningless. However, Heyer points out that order is relative concept: “Order is a question of magnitude and content. The environment is a totality, which we dissect into parcels of varying scale that have a stability that we work within. In this sense the collective image is a further urban artifact that negates an absolute aesthetic.”⁷⁸

Riley envisions the new landscape as a network based on entirely different motivations, economics, and sociology than in past systems. It is a network with fewer spatial and distance restrictions than the old network and, in fact, with electronic communications, about as aspatial as any spatial network can be. It is a network lacking any theoretical models, unlike the old organizational systems. Such models will probably be vastly different, more complex, and less spatial than those for the old network.

For Frampton, the problem of developing a regional architecture that is critical is somewhat similar to Lewis’ concept of the expansion of the Galactic City and the transformation of the landscape. Neither Riley nor Frampton are interested in a sim-

plistic evocation of a sentimental or ironic vernacular, or a return to an ethos of a popular culture. Frampton presents Critical Regionalism as a “dialectical expression that self-consciously seeks to deconstruct universal modernism in terms of values and images which are locally cultivated, while at the same time adulterating these autochthonous elements with paradigms drawn from alien sources.”⁷⁹ In other words, it is a hybrid cross-fertilization of vernacular building, local craft traditions, and indigenous materials infused with the ideological trappings of so-called “high” architecture.

This approach has been attempted in diverse situations with very mixed results. In Frampton’s view the most noteworthy examples of Critical Regionalism tend to be found in highly localized regions and movements, such as the Catalan nationalist revival in the early Fifties and specific projects by Bofill, Siza y Viera, and Botta. Although many forms of regionalism persist or are evident in the U.S. they tend to be much less focused into a school or discipline, and are typically characterized by responses to climate, region, and purpose rather than ideology. A notable exception is the planned community of Seaside, Florida that, ostensibly, reflects the vernacular building and town planning traditions of southeast U.S. small towns and municipalities. But even with its strictly enforced urban and design codes Seaside is criticized as pastiche and not authentic regional architecture. Heyer is disturbed by the limitations inherent in planned communities where exclusion becomes predicated over inclusion and heterogeneity is sacrificed for homogeneous solutions:

“Beyond surface aesthetics to inner meaning, it now becomes clear that our abhorrence to many planned communities is actually not their order (or really superficial organization) but the fact that their order is phony, arbitrary, and excruciatingly limited. All acts of design must, for reasons of practicality, be based upon assumption and exclusion, but we feel betrayed when the omission takes too much from the human.”¹⁰

Authenticity and Non-Arbitrary Architecture

The question for most architects is how to be inclusive without sacrificing unity or meaning. Curtis presents Le Corbusier’s and Kahn’s appropriation of regionalist influences in their parliament buildings as “authentic” expressions of local culture and traditions. In the case of Le Corbusier’s parliament building at Chandigarh, the response was both climatic and iconographic. Le Corbusier adapted his own modernist interpretations of the parasol roof, brise soleil, and pilotis into symbolic motifs emblematic of the emergent democracy. However, is this expression of regionalism any more “critical” or “authentic” than a barn or a hybrid architecture of eclectic borrowings?

To some degree, both Curtis and Frampton labor under the pretense that regionalism is only valid as architecture when it can be found explicitly or implicitly in the work of renowned architects. After all, they already have the appropriate theoretic-

cal and ideological credentials. Their interpretations are based on a heroic view of the artist. Historical revisions can always be made when inconsistencies emerge between the theoretical underpinnings of great architects and their buildings.

In "Thoughts on a Non-Arbitrary Architecture" Karsten Harries writes that the aesthetic approach, which for more than two centuries has dominated both reflection about art and artistic practice, has led to an architecture of decorated sheds. "The problem of arbitrariness in architecture," he contends, "has one root in our aesthetic approach; the other lies in our inability to view buildings apart from any consideration of dwelling."¹¹

According to Harries, Venturi subscribes to the traditional view that a successful work of art, while incorporating and becoming stronger because of ambiguities and tensions, must yet be an integrated whole. Consequently, all architects are held to the same standard: "But an architecture of complexity and contradiction has a special obligation toward the whole: its truth must be in its totality or its implications of totality. It must embody the difficult unity of inclusion rather than the easy unity of exclusion. More is not less."¹² Harries sees a contradiction between Venturi's desire for unity and his eclectic manipulations of forms and iconography. An architecture of decorated sheds should give up all claim to aesthetic wholes.

The problem of arbitrariness, according to Harries, might be met by returning to what is essential: "True Freedom is not freedom from constraint, but rather to be constrained by what one really is, by one's essence."¹³ The Engineer's Aesthetic espoused by Le Corbusier and Loos recognized that the engineer must be attuned to the laws of nature and that from the engineer, a healing of the rift opened by subjectivism could occur. In this context meaning cannot automatically be conjured through an arbitrary appropriation of history or application of historical motifs but must be developed at a more fundamental level.

Harries is critical of architecture which manipulates forms to aesthetic ends and that draws in arbitrary ways from past architectural examples without conviction:

"If history is to offer an answer to the problem of arbitrariness, it must be experienced not as a reservoir of more or less interesting motifs which we can pick up or discard as we see fit, but as a tradition that determines our place and destiny, in which we stand and to which we belong."¹⁴

Curtis writes that Post-modernist dogma presumes that abstraction involves divorce from the past, but in the right hands it may become a device through which the artist enters the past on a number of levels simultaneously and then transforms its lessons into an authentic form in the present. He believes that the divisive arguments between "post-modern" and "modern" have limited critical value because they oversimplify the relationship between invention and precedent, between genuine transformation and pastiche. It is the difference between understanding the profound implications of order and meaning to be discovered in a great work of architecture such as Bramante's

Tempietto, and "a devalued revival of the same formula." Authentic works possess a sort of temporal depth and resonance. Part of the power of the authentic work stems from the mythical dimension in the artist's mind. "The artist who has found an appropriate language for a genuine myth," he writes, "will also possess the imaginative force to forge together past experiences into new unexpected wholes which are utterly convincing."¹⁵

Of course, Curtis is making a lot of assumptions about the intent of the artist and his ability to effectively synthesize form and meaning into a potent, mythic architecture. At Chandigarh, for example, Le Corbusier had the complex task of expressing the traditions and the capacity for innovation of newly independent India. The main symbolic motif of Chandigarh became the upturned crescent form supported on stanchions and creating a shaded space beneath it. Thus his initial response to India was climatic, and it led him to the common-sense device of a shading parasol against the rigors of the tropical sun and the monsoons. As the designs of the various buildings and components of the new capital progressed, the practical was rapidly turned into the mythical.

Techné and Craft

If authenticity and non-arbitrariness are co-determinates of a genuine mythic architecture rooted in local culture and traditions, then *techné* and craft are implicitly contained in those traditions. Giuseppe Zambonini addresses the issue of making artifacts from the viewpoint of craft and tradition. His premise is that the nature of every man-made form—particularly architecture—is inlaid in the process of making. Issues of quality are governed by the degree to which the materials and methods typical to the host society are integrated together. "Through their employment," he writes, "the maker intends to contribute to the traditions and common meanings of the collectivity in which production is nested, without renouncing technological advance or personal expression."¹⁶

Louis Kahn's Parliament Building at Dacca, Bangladesh (1962–70) evokes the archaic character of the region and the culture. The rough brick and concrete materials made sense in terms of local geographical and labor conditions, but also matched the artist's intentions of creating a building of ancient character. Classical inspirations were so imbedded in Kahn's mind that it becomes difficult to single out particular sources. A few conjectural sources for the embedded volumes of the Parliament might include Jefferson's University of Virginia with its variations in function and meaning within a common system, the feeling for abstraction evoked by the visionary Neo-Classicism of Boullée and Ledoux, and the ceremonial use of space and "deviant" circular ramps to one side of the Paris Opera House.¹⁷ Whatever sources Kahn may have used, Curtis asserts, abstraction became the device through which a virtual archetype was unearthed, awakened, and revitalized.

For Zambonini, making is a moral issue dealing simultaneously with preservation and innovation. "It is within the criti-

cal interpretation of these two apparent opposites that the range and quality of discussion applicable to the process of making occurs.”¹⁸ He points out that any activity of production involves the transformation of matter for a purpose clearly defined somewhere between society and the individual. The maker and the object to be created are tied together by an intimate relationship that does not disappear at the conclusion of the production process. This relationship can be described in different ways, in each case inseparably connected to the nature of the production itself.

Thus, craft and culture converge bringing Zambonini’s argument in line with Frampton’s views on Critical Regionalism and Curtis’ exhortations for authenticity. In each case, transformation is an essential process through which the artist manipulates indigenous forms and meanings to new ends. Frampton characteristically points out the tectonic nature of John and Patricia Patkau’s architecture as a sort of liberating device freeing them from the excesses of self-indulgent artistry. “As one might expect,” he writes, “such work tends to be removed from the current modernist versus historicist debate: the *reductio ad absurdum* of neo avant garde versus nostalgic. Between these two equally demographic alternatives there still remains the possibility of continuing with the century-old tradition of modernity and the significance of the Patkau practice lies in its critical cultivation of tradition at its best.”¹⁹

The sweeping roof forms and timber construction of the Seabird Island School in Agassiz, British Columbia derives its power from the remote building context and culture, the severity of the environment, and a particular building culture. It suggests a way in which architects might come to terms with Riley’s concerns about the transformation of the new rural landscape and the uncontrolled encroachment of urban development into the natural order. The project’s success is entirely dependent upon the architects’ understanding and sensitivity towards the delicate coastal environment, the indigenous native population and customs, and the local craft tradition of timber-shelled construction.

As in Le Corbusier’s and Kahn’s parliament buildings, Frampton asserts that “the totemic, mythic elements of the project emerge at a more rooted level, where they express themselves in the form of a Semperian roof work, rising up as an alpine metaphor...so as to evoke the animalistic imagery of the Pacific northwest and to suggest...the great totemic houses of a lost oceanic culture.”²⁰

An Authentic Style

In coming to terms with regionalism and the transformation of the landscape architects must be prepared to accept, understand, and interpret local cultures and traditions. As modernists, architects must also contend with the issues of the modern world, including their attendant anomalies and paradoxes. Ricoeur’s paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal

civilization will persist until, according to Curtis, the artist can find an authentic style. Architects who are capable of authenticity must be able to encapsulate a mythical view of society, a formal system appropriate to the building idea, and an intuitive sense of order in both tradition and nature.²¹

If the architect is to avoid arbitrariness and pastiche, as Harries argues, then we have no choice but to attempt to articulate what is essential or natural. This implies a return to origins or “a rethinking of what you do customarily, an attempt to renew the validity of your everyday actions, or simply a recall of the natural (or even divine) sanction of your repeating them for a season.”²²

At a fundamental level, the Seabird Island School is about craft and building. Arrigo Rudi, an architect and lifetime collaborator of Carlo Scarpa, argues that there are two conditions of true craftsmanship: first, the artisan must possess a certain creative insight, and second, that he acquire and utilize a knowledge of the entire process in view of this goal. Zambonini postulates that a man-made thing cannot be authentic or resonate with meaning unless the artisan reclaims creativity and the objectives of production:

“In reclaiming creativity, the artisan calls back to his realm the right of, and capacity for, judgement regarding necessary technological advance, such as the *ad hoc* fabrication of jigs or the structural modification of tools. Knowledge of the entire process is essential also so that every minute choice involving materials and methods can be bent, at the artisan’s discretion, so to clearly and fully address the objectives of production.”²³

For Zambonini, there is a fundamental difference between a process oriented fundamentally toward material as opposed to ideas. His point is not to denigrate the role of ideas in any creative enterprise, but rather to focus attention on the essences of objects themselves— an object’s capacity to carry meaning embodied in its physical qualities, in its materiality.²⁴

The true style, according to Curtis, is the opposite of a dead formula: it is a basis for perception and expression; it supplies consistent devices for ordering ideas and forms according to intuitive rules and, despite repetition, it is a restraint that allows creative freedom while giving that freedom a direction and an aim.²⁵ Therefore, the strength of a genuine fusion, in contrast to the mere concoction or replication lies in a realm of intuitive appropriateness that far transcends any passing ideal of grammatical correctness. As Riley states, “when we add a knowledge of the constraints, both regional and cultural, within which both choice and design must operate, maybe, as designers and planners, we can assemble a new vision for that landscape.”²⁶

NOTES

- ¹ William J.R. Curtis, "Authenticity, Abstraction and the Ancient Sense: Le Corbusier's and Louis Kahn's Ideas of Parliament," *Perspecta 20: The Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983) p.182.
- ² Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," *Perspecta 20: The Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983) p.148.
- ³ Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," *History and Truth* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1961) pp. 276.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 283.
- ⁵ Paul Heyer, *American Architecture: Ideas and Ideologies in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993) p.176.
- ⁶ Robert B. Riley, "Thoughts on the New Rural Landscape," *Places: A Quarterly Journal of Environmental Design*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Brooklyn, New York: Pratt Institute School of Architecture, Summer, 1993) p. 85.
- ⁷ Pierce Lewis, "The Unprecedented City," *The American Land* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).
- ⁸ Heyer, p. 182.
- ⁹ Frampton, p. 149.
- ¹⁰ Heyer, p. 166.
- ¹¹ Karsten Harries, "Thoughts on a Non-Arbitrary Architecture," *Perspecta 20: The Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983) p.11.
- ¹² Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977) p. 16.
- ¹³ Harries, p. 11.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹⁵ Curtis, p. 184.
- ¹⁶ Giuseppe Zambonini, "Notes for a Theory of Making in a Time of Necessity," *Perspecta 24: The Yale Architectural Journal* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1988) p.3.
- ¹⁷ Curtis, p. 191.
- ¹⁸ Zambonini, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Kenneth Frampton, "Tecto-Totemic Form: A Note on Patkau Associates," *Architects Process Inspiration Perspecta 28: The Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977) p.180.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- ²¹ Curtis, p. 194.
- ²² Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972) p. 182.
- ²³ Zambonini, p. 7.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ²⁵ Curtis, p. 184.
- ²⁶ Riley, p. 89.