

Critical Regionalism and the Rebirth of the Small Town

KIMBERLY BROWN

Mississippi State University

As technology makes the world more accessible and more consumable, the character of our communities becomes hidden behind generic shopping centers, barren, underutilized parks and uniform tracts of housing. Our focus has shifted from the local community to the complete globalization of the world with buildings which exemplify modern technology yet are alienated environments absent of history and unsympathetic towards the human condition. This is a problem facing many urban and suburban areas, however, it reaches a dire proportion in small cities and towns which have unique economic and historical patterns yet do not have the money nor design resources to effectively combat the meaningless buildings that result from sprawl development.

In the 1990's, "more than 18 million people moved from metropolitan areas into small cities or rural counties."¹ The main reason cited for the move to smaller places is the desire for a 'sense of place,' described as a quality of life that has an emphasis on community interaction.² People who move from urban areas to smaller places, have a sense of optimism that small towns have the charm that they once had complete with of romanticized images of front porches and town squares. For a small town to attract a population increase, it must be aware of its strengths and not dilute its originality in an attempt to attract more growth. These small localities must take an assessment of their local cultures, local materials, and respect local sensibilities and traditions.

Small towns make false promises of their commitment to their continued sense of place when the newest constructions reveal little about the identity of the community. If local values can be seen in the buildings that make up a community, what is said of a place that gives tax incentives to globalized chain stores - giving priority to the national

chain over the riskier albeit familiar, local business? Aldo Rossi relates urban artifacts to art through their unique qualities "their individuality and their structure."³ The unique building techniques and local materials create an order to the place. This order and the comprehensible nature of small towns make the uniqueness of small towns applicable to an urban artifact or thought of as an art object in itself.⁴

The most disruptive new development in rapidly growing in rural cities and towns is sprawl development and it's most popular building type, the big box store. Although this development style originated in the 1950's, there has been little or no change in the planning strategies for small cities and towns. Sprawl development takes the focus of commercial shopping away from historical downtowns. This is detrimental to a community's 'sense of place' making the original downtowns at risk and threatening the town's unique cultural heritage.

Architects must be aware of the positive as well as the negative aspects of a universal civilization and remember that it is not about denying technological breakthroughs. How do we approach the problem of technology and the loss of the urban artifact defined as "sense of place?" The Texas architect, O'Neill Ford feels that we must make modernism come to terms with history by developing a regional architecture that transcends the "simple mimicry of indigenous forms and traditions."⁵ Kenneth Frampton calls this preservation of the heterogeneous cultures and acceptance of technology - Critical Regionalism. Critical Regionalism stresses place over space. It embraces the spirit of a place and its culture, the sensibilities, the customs, the aesthetic awareness and the distinctive social traditions while at the same time it acknowledges and employs the changes brought on by our modern

world. Tadao Ando, an architect who has been defined by Frampton as a Critical Regionalist, says that he designs with a building language "between universal modernization and the idiosyncrasy of a rooted culture."⁶

One attempt at recreating the indescribable essence of successful places is by utilizing graphic stereotypes to recreate the romanticized past with iconic language. As a result buildings become a set of rules and forms, which are disappointingly limited to the experience of their image - attractively packaged but inferior in content. In order to create an architecture which embodies place, architects must avoid rules and regulations and allow for the buildings to emerge as the site and local material specifies. Frampton argues that the construction for visual appearance does not address the "tactile range of human perceptions."⁷ Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, who coined the phrase Critical Regionalism, ask how can one be regionalist and critical at the same time? The word, critical, implies that the building it is referring to is being aware of both its cultural surroundings and at the same time aware of the world of contemporary building. Tzonis and Lefaivre feel that this challenge occurs when a building is extremely self-conscious-and aware of the self-referential nature of many narcissistic modern buildings.⁸

Identifiable regions and small towns are losing the localized construction practices which define a place. Local materials and local construction techniques, particular to a place, were the collective social structures that bound towns together. "Towns, like people, have personal qualities and the successful town has one quality in particular - a definite sense of time and place; such a town will be remembered."⁹ The search for an architecture which embodies the tangible and intangible quality of a place is difficult in today's technologically advanced world. Frampton describes the "tactile resilience of the place-form and the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone suggest a potential strategy for resisting the domination of universal technology."¹⁰

Learning from the past, Critical Regionalism employs the knowledge of regional design elements from vernacular architecture and reinterprets these elements in new buildings. Tzonis and Lefaivre's

article call this defamiliarization: "Identifying, decomposing, and recomposing elements." The qualities and distinctive character of the vernacular cannot be achieved by imitating it. A building should not be "a sentimental cozy indulgence in nostalgia."¹¹

In the past, a person had to drive to the Main Street, past the courthouse to the Central Business District to go shopping. Typically shopping was centralized downtown near civic institutions. Only infrastructure stores such as food chains, gas stations, motels and bank branches were located near the highways for the truck driver or the traveler stopping in the town. Each drive into the downtown was a commemoration to the town's hierarchy and structure. Stores are now moving out of existing locations to get closer and closer to the capitalist sprawling hot spots and are leaving abandoning buildings in the wake. Strip malls are not free from their own demise, the stores close and move as shopping trends shift.

The downtown area, where the streets are smaller, are not redesigned to accommodate the large trucks and do not appear to have as much available open land for a large store and its parking lot. Rather than working in the existing structure of each town, big box stores influence the political strategies of the town. This ultimately result is in changes to zoning practices to reflect the interests of stores, moving the town center from the Main Street to the main highway access. These moves have a severe effect on the structure and public life of American small towns. Public institutions now follow the sprawl trends rather than the other way around. The United States Postal Service, used to build post office buildings that celebrated civic importance - serving as identification and status symbols for communities, now they are located near shopping centers adjacent to highway bypasses. The well-crafted landmarks constructed of lasting materials are replaced with a utilitarian building, simply another machine for selling consumer goods.

In addition to changing the town structure, the town's original aesthetics and vernacular and local building materials are ignored in the construction of sprawl buildings. Similarly, the architects, Diller and Scofidio describe how New York city ignores the ugliness and immoral aspects of 42nd Street because it is such a great money maker.¹² Small

town business people have the same dilemmas. The appearance of most big box store chains does not change; the appearance remains the same in every small city. The large box-shaped, concrete masonry unit structures are not site-specific. The arrogance of the same ugly structure to permeate into every town represents how the building form embodies the developer's power.¹³ The "Wal-Marting" of American small towns has threatened to kill the uniqueness and character of place. It has significantly hurt the identity of the small town.

As a result of the consumerist changes in public space and its severe effects on the structure of American towns, stores are moving out of existing locations to get closer and closer to the capitalist hot spots and are leaving abandoning buildings in the wake. These iconic block buildings and strip malls are not free from their own demise. The economic model of franchised retail companies that are generally housed in big-box buildings sees the company building a new store and abandoning the functioning store before the building is in need of repair or appears dated. The stores close and move as shopping trends shift.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING PUBLIC REALM

"Products nestled in an ecology of community, entertainment and societal identities, the mall becomes a civic arena."¹⁴ Big box stores like the mall in larger cities has an important role in the social realm of the town and socializes the inhabitant's lives. Shopping centers are "incorporating more and more of the city inside their walls."¹⁵ By using its private space for public interaction, the store has become the civic center for many towns. The big box parking lot becomes the new embodiment of a town square. It is here that quite a lot of business takes place as the center for consumerism takes on the role as the center of the town. Chance meetings, which once occurred on the town streets, now occur on the private land of the mall.¹⁶ The public versus private politics of the store and its parking lot is an interesting situation. On one hand there is the realm of the store land acting as a public space; however, the store has power of the space and ultimate control over what is being said on the property. Essentially the store is framing the public sphere into what it wants it to be. The 'new' public square embodies the power of capitalist space over public life.

As towns continue to evolve due to sprawl development, it is motivating to watch how existing abandoned buildings are reappropriated by townspeople in specific ways as functions arise. This reuse creates new urban artifacts for communities. It is here that the spark of originality in a town is reestablished and there is potential for a rebirth of the city's 'sense of place.' The creative abilities of people reusing these abandoned spaces can allow a town to speak of its past and its history and most importantly, its future. In the book *the Small Town as Art Object*, a small town is described the attitude of an observer in a small town as "primarily a feeling of change and complexity of the observed image. It leaves the viewer with an attitude that he should ponder the view longer than the span of seconds."¹⁷ The creative reuse of buildings can recreate this encouraging complexity in a town and make significant contrasts to big box stores which are easily understood and leave little to the imagination of the observer.

In one small southern town, when Wal-Mart decided to expand, it left its building and moved a half a mile down the road. Since then, the abandoned building has been filled with various smaller businesses. The owner of the building gave it to the city. The city accepted the building and plans are now underway to change the old "Wal-Mart-Discount City" into the new city hall and police station. The iconic building, which was built the same in every location across America, is being transformed for a specific client. It has a specific program, and it is unique to the community and the community's needs. Through its transformation, this old Wal-Mart is being reintroduced as a public artifact. The big box building is being revised in a way that is appropriate for the location. The new functions meet the community's needs and are appropriate for the town's surroundings, an appropriate example of Critical Regionalism in the modern small town. Unlike the previous tenants, of the box store, which moved to adapt to change, the Wal-Mart City Hall is a working environment; it can accommodate growth and has enough room to modify the needs of its clients over time. Think of how 80, 000 empty square feet of 16 foot ceilings, superb lighting and complete HVAC, could be used for a public institution. Unlike the original big box store, which raised the land when it was built, the new civic use accepts the history of the landscape and is leaving it, as it is to work with - rather

than forgetting its past. The new use, which doesn't require as much parking -save for the police cars- can do something about the parking lot expanse, which is one of the most difficult aesthetic problems in sprawl development. Possibilities for the parking lot are open and can include the planting of trees, creating parks and playgrounds.

The way that small cities adjust to the current trends in consumer space are intriguing to study. Another small town reused their abandoned big box store to replace a high school that was destroyed by a fire. A third town renovated a big box carcass into a fashionable bowling alley. The conscientious re-use invigorates the public realm and strengthens the community.

There are three additional examples of building reuse that further explain the potential for a community to strengthen its 'sense of place' and resist the monoculture encouraged by sprawl. In Jackson, Mississippi, an abandoned shopping mall has become an outpatient medical facility and renamed itself the Jackson Medical Mall. A large gate now closes off the parking lot and an ambulance entrance has replaced the grand consumer entrance. Parts of the mall have been restored to shopping status and house a gift store, a shoe repair, a lunch counter, a branch of the County Health Department, an employment office, and a loan office. The Jackson Medical Mall's success improved the surrounding declining neighborhood, meeting the needs of the community while replacing the eyesore of the defunct mall. It has replaced commercial public space with a public institution.

The second example occurred when the Admiral Hotel began losing business to newer hotel chains resulting from sprawl. The Admiral's cocktail lounge, however, remained a favorite spot with the retirement crowd. In response, the Admiral Hotel became the Admiral Retirement Center and Residence. Lastly, a motel located on a desolate highway, became a State of Mississippi Women's Correctional Facility.

These reused buildings are contextual, critical responses to the iconic buildings of the strip, holding the imagination of the local culture and emerging from the predictable to embody local character. "By virtue of its capacity to regulate action, (architecture) exerts control and constitutes a form of power."¹⁸

It is liberating to see an architectural form liberated from its first use and woven back into the original culture. Critical Regionalism is connected with its surroundings and has a concern for place and making things site-specific. Learning from the past, Critical Regionalism employs the knowledge of regional design elements from vernacular architecture and reinterprets these elements in new buildings creating urban artifacts that have meaning and enforce a collective memory. Critical Regionalism is an approach to architecture that strives to counter the placeness and lack of meaning in Modern Architecture by using contextual forces to give a sense of place and meaning. In each of these cases it is the community's uniqueness in decision making and the implementation of successful public policies that creates this successful pocket of Critical Regionalism.

CONCLUSION: PROCESS FOR THE FUTURE

The purpose of this research is to gather information on successful public policies and economic strategies that encourage the redevelopment of properties in the community core and to discover and prove the economic liability of uninhibited sprawl growth. The Carl Small Town Center (CSTC), a community design center located at the Mississippi State University College of Architecture, Art, and Design, is working to make abandoned properties in the central business districts of Mississippi's small towns viable sites for reuse.

To better understand the modern civic realm and the potential for redeveloping big box store sites, a third-year studio taught during fall 2003, attempted to make some conclusions about the potential for this type of development. The students in the class interview two different towns with abandoned big box store sites to understand the community and its needs. Based on the interviews of the residents, and a survey of the existing town, the students were asked to redesign the big box stores to encompass, a mixed use community which would include a performance space, commercial space, residential apartments, and a redefinition of community public space. The studio addressed the viability of alternatives and the potential of built-form to achieve more than its internal programmatic need.

Following the studio course, to understand the reasons that inhibit site reuse, promoting city expan-

sion and development through sprawl, the CSTC held a resource workshop in June to discuss this issue with statewide experts including the president of Mississippi's Realtors Association, the executive director of the Mississippi Heritage Trust, the executive director of the Mississippi Main Street Association, staff of the Mississippi Development Authority, staff of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, faculty from Mississippi State University's School of Architecture, regional architects and developers, and others. At this meeting participants specifically addressed how to reuse abandoned big box stores and tested hypotheses on four abandoned stores in the Starkville, Mississippi region.

With the research, the CSTC will develop a set of case study documents and design guidelines to give decision makers in cities and towns in Mississippi strategies that will allow them to reuse and rethink vacant sites in their city fabric. The design guidelines will deal with a variety of building types and styles, relating to size, materials, zoning, surrounding land use, and age (historic or modern). In addition, a continuing education course will be developed for use at municipal training sessions for national dissemination. It is hoped that the resulting methodologies can be applied to small towns for tangible change.

NOTES

¹ Schultz. Boomtown, USA, 9.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ Rossi. The Architecture of the City. 29

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32

⁵ Dillon.

The Architecture of O'Neil Ford: Celebrating Place.

⁶ Frampton.

"Towards a Critical Regionalism," 29.

Ibid., 28

⁸ Tsonis,

"Why Critical Regionalism Today?"

⁹ Barker, "The Small Town as Art Object," 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ Tsonis, "Why Critical Regionalism Today?"

¹² Diller, Flesh.

¹³ Kahn. "The Invisible Mask," 85.

¹⁴ William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "Bold New City

or Built-Up Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia," American Quarterly. (March 1994), 11-12.

¹⁵ Crawford. Variations on a Theme Park, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ Barker, "The Small Town as Art Object," 22.

¹⁸ Kahn. "The Invisible Mask," 85.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barker, James F., Michael Fazio, and Hank Hildebrandt. "The Small Town as an Art Object." Mississippi State, MS; Mitchell Memorial Library, 1975.

Calthorpe, Peter. The Next American Metropolis. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993.

Crawford, Margaret. "The World in a Shopping Mall." Variations on a Theme Park. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1992.

Dillon, David. The Architecture of O'Neil Ford: Celebrating Place. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

Diller, Elizabeth, and Ricardo Scofidio, Flesh: Architectural Probes. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994.

Duany, Andres and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, "The Second Coming of the American Small Town," Historic Preservation Forum. Spring 1995 30-45.

Frampton, Kenneth. Studies in tectonic culture: the poetics of construction in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, c1995.

Frampton, Kenneth. "Towards a Critical Regionalism" The Anti-Aesthetic. Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983.

Hayden, Dolores. Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984.

Kahn, Andrea. "The Invisible Mask," Drawing, Building, Text. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991

Lefebvre, Henri. The Production of Space. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Lefebvre, Henri. "Space: Social Product and Use Value," Critical Sociology Trans., Publishers, 1997.

Rossi, Aldo. The Architecture of the City. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982.

Schultz, Jack. Boomtown, USA: The 7-1/2 Keys to Big Success in Small Towns. Herndon, VA: NAIOP, 2004.

Tsonis, Alexander and Liane Lefaivre. "Why Critical Regionalism Today?" Architecture and Urbanism. 1990 May, no 5. p.23-33.

William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, "Bold New City or Built-Up Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia,"

American Quarterly. March 1994.

Information acquired from Wal-Mart web site visit: www.walmart.com