

Interview

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by Todd Richards and Franka Trubiano



Kenneth Frampton expose ici les bases du régionalisme critique: l'attitude critique de l'architecte face aux pressions croissantes du marché de l'immobilier.

The Fifth Column: We may commence this discussion by inquiring upon what type of perspective does one have on the writings of Critical Regionalism since their first publication in 1983?

How have its principle ideas and issues changed and adapted to the changing architectural spectrum of the past five years?

Prof. Kenneth Frampton: In answering this question, there are two articles, one published in *Perspecta 20* in 1983, and then in the same year, in the book *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster, a second article, was published. The second article grew out of the first. Hal Foster wrote the first article, which is in a way more descriptive in that it works by citing examples mainly. He then asked me to write the second article within which I was asked to try to develop something that was more theoretical, more a matter of principal, which is what I tried to do with the "Six Points of an Architectural Resistance". Therefore, while both articles share the same title, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", the second one was subtitled "Six Points of an Architectural Resistance".

There is this five year lapse of time, and the question of how and in what way has the original position changed in this five year period, can best be answered by sighting that there has been since that time, since 1983, a lot of talk about regionalism, if not Critical Regionalism. The whole notion of regionalism has surfaced. For example, the School of Architecture and the Centre for Studies in American Architecture, which is based in Austin, Texas has become very involved in this issue. They organised a conference last year, or the year before, on regionalism. And I have obviously also given quite a few lectures on this subject in the five year period we've been talking about.

One of the things which is embarrassing about the term Critical Regionalism is, in what way is Critical Regionalism different from Regionalism and does the term, the adjective, Critical, really qualify sufficiently the term Regionalism? It's problematic because there is this misunderstanding that Critical Regionalism is really just regionalism, and regionalism in the kind of sentimental and demagogic sense, which implies a specific style, therefore of course implying somehow or other, a very direct and simple minded reference to the vernacular. It is disturbing, of course, that this issue constantly comes up, this issue of being misunderstood in this way, and in a sense also being appropriated through that misunderstanding as someone who supports a kind of nostalgic, sentimental attitude towards the vernacular. I've tried to correct that and in fact to start to talk about it in terms of a kind of necessary dialogue between tectonic, on the one hand, and topographic on the other, is perhaps a strategy for avoiding this kind of misunderstanding.

TFC: You have on previous occasions previously discussed The Human Condition in relation to architecture and more specifically in relation to Critical Regionalism. What impact has Hannah Arendt's book had on architectural thought and expression with its underlying notion of existentialism?

KF: Well I suppose one has to be a little careful in arguing that that book you just mentioned is an existentialist text, it is a text of course that is influenced by existentialist philosophy.

Arendt was a pupil of Heidegger in any case, and also of Jasper, and as such she is very much formed by that mode of beholding.

To come to the text itself, the most important argument that she makes is this argument about the victory of the Animal Laborantis. It is seen by certain critics of Arendt as a somewhat elitist view of the world, but I think that her perception is very convincing when she makes the case that modern industrialised mass society has created very large populations where the members of these populations are impelled to consume and that the economic imperatives of a late industrialized society emphasize consumption to an inordinate degree. In fact, in discussing the Animal Laborantis, I should say that we are, and I am paraphrasing, compelled to consume our houses, our television sets, our clothes, our cars as though they are the fruits of the earth which would perish if they were not immediately bound into the metabolic cycle of man, of nature.

Through that, quite brilliant insight she makes this parallelism between surplus industrial production and the necessity for its incessant consumption in order to maintain it within the economic cycle. The way in which objects are reduced to this state and the challenge that it then offers vis-a-vis architecture is reflected in the fact that the rate at which buildings amortise has shortened. The life expectancy of a building in New York used to be forty years and I think its even less than this today as predetermined and calculated from the point of view of tax legislation. The whole pressure of the building economy, to build cheaper and to amortise the investment at a more rapid rate tends towards reducing the building to a consumer object. Yet one of the strengths of the built environment is its inherent aspect of resistance in that the object is not a freestanding object like an automobile, or a television set, but rather it is anchored into the ground. It has been the idiosyncratic nature of the

ground and the anchor that has been one of the reasons why it has been notoriously difficult to industrialize the production of the environment. Yet, one also has to admit to the attempt at the total industrialization of building, with the whole discussion in the Post-War period, in the 50's, of the promise of the total prefabrication of the environment, which did not come into being because of the lack of market, that is, the relationship in terms of consumption between the investment of the built artifact in the ground and its relation to property value. And of course one comes back to the market being determined by consumption. All these things have inhibited, in a way, the project, the modern project. There are so many complex issues involved here but I think that through her insight, vis-a-vis what she places under the rubric of the victory of the Animal Laborantis, is an awareness that these enormous imperatives influence or have an impact upon the practice of architecture and the first thing I suppose one can say without going further is that it is extremely important that architects should be aware of this as a pressure that exists within the society. Then, they have to respond, it seems to me, in different ways to that pressure, partly because of the way in which that pressure itself changes but also because it is possible in one building to take different attitudes towards this condition.

TFC: How do the principles of Critical Regionalism apply to a place which does not necessarily embody an inherent regionalism?

Within the American context, the city of Houston can be seen as such an example. Is its present reality, which is the reflection of a purely economically driven and controlled environment, not more appropriate than the notion of adapting a transplanted series of architectural intentions in the hope of establishing a more appropriate form of regionalism?

KF: This question raises the issue about how can one talk about a regional culture when one has an uprooted condition and a fundamental break in traditional society, a break which is, in a way, the elimination of traditional society, indeed the elimination of the vernacular, and as such how can one talk about a regionalism at all? There seems to be in a sense a lie here, particularly in relation to modernization and in relation to a kind of modernised reality.

I think that part of this response arises out of the opposition that one could appropriate from German nineteenth century thought, through such a philosopher

as Ricoer, which is to recognise or to set up a mode of beholding and operating in which one can see the forces of universal civilization, and at the same time posit the possibility of balancing those forces or resisting them in some way.

Ricoer raises the issue very forcibly when he says that no developing nation can afford to forego the benefits of universal civilization. I think he is right, without question, but there is a real difference here between maximized technology and mediated technology. This becomes clear primarily through certain

kinds of parallels, agriculture is one of them, medicine is another, it is clear that maximized agricultural technology has created a situation in some parts of the world where there are enormous agricultural surpluses which they don't know what to do with. This is particularly the case in Europe. Furthermore, the environment is extremely polluted because this maximized approach has been taken. The water table is polluted in some parts of Europe through the over fertilization of the ground, over production in fact. Even dairy production has led to pollution. In Scotland right now, there is an enormous amount of pollution due to dairy products, that is, waste dairy products entering the water system and killing fish for example. So here you have this paradox where what one thinks of as a natural production, particularly agriculture, becomes maximized under the rubric, or under the rule if you like, of the imperatives of the universe of technology. This is a grotesque use of technology and to sight a particular case, it is very well known that we are at the beginning of immunity in the population at large to penicillin and to other antibiotics because the technology of the antibiotic has been abused. This also relates to the kind of consumerist attitude that becomes the objective on the part of the pharmaceutical companies, and the medical profession as well. When one puts it into those areas, agriculture and medicine, I think one can see much more clearly the necessity for a dialectical otherness to resist this tendency towards maximization and universalization wherein one may develop a kind of level of mediation that does not always use the maximum.

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TFC: As architects is it our moral duty to acquire a critical attitude and inform people as to their need for an all encompassing form of resistance. Or rather, would it be more effective to occupy ourselves with

trying to discover and understand why the people in the Third World want this maximization? Would this attitude not better serve those which we are asked to build for?

KF: Why people want what they want and how people get to want what they want is an enormous problem. We touch here immediately this question of politics and the depoliti-

cization of society and the whole problem of education and awareness and critical consciousness. To the extent that television is a misinformation industry, it is a tool in the depoliticization of a society. One only has to look at television to realise that that is the case. On the one hand it's the tool of information but at the same time what is information? Information is not neutral, and particularly the information that is put through the television network is not neutral either, and therefore to some extent it is just disinformation, and of course it is ideologically functional to the expansion of the consumerist market and to the maximization of certain technologies. And so you run right into politics. One can't talk about architects as being just architects. They are architects but they're also members of a body politic and as such there are many levels on which this discussion should be engaged.

It's extremely difficult when the architect, because he is a liberal professional, working in a society such as this, is commissioned to do a global work where the work is determined by very imperious forces with very severe calculations. It is very difficult working at that scale to do a work which is critically responsible, of course it is possible to set up a dialogue, but it's quite difficult, I am talking of course about the way in which the American real estate industry and the development of working in the American real estate industry almost predetermines, together with the bureaucracies of the mortgage companies and the banks, the product that hits the market.

In a way, this whole argument does touch on ecological questions. In 1963, Chermayeff and Alexander wrote this very remarkable book Community and Privacy. The argument set forth in that book about land settlement, in relation to megalopoli and in relation to neo-capitalist society are incredibly cogent and valid, then and now. Land settlement patterns that are as responsible as those set out in Community and Privacy have not been embraced by the society. And yet when you look at Community and Privacy one cannot look at it as a radical document which would presuppose revolutionary conditions in order to be applied. It is a mediation, it mediates in a sense within late capitalist civilization and technology. But the power of mortgage companies and the banks is absolute. What gets built in the suburbs is determined by the banks, the mortgage companies and the bureaucracies together. When you talk about what the people want, we are here faced with the real dilemma. What they want is what they are actually given to a certain extent, while the banks and the mortgage companies are going to turn around and say, but the people want that. I'm not convinced. I think that the power of mortgage companies, banks and bureaucracies to predetermine the rate at which land is consumed is enormous and it becomes an ecological and political issue, ultimately. When you look at Community and Privacy, it's not like looking at Le Corbusier megalomaniacal Utopian, Avant Gardist projects, it's an extremely realist critic and thesis.

TFC: As architects in the late twentieth century, we are faced with what some consider to be a Post-Post Modern Condition where once more the architectural discourse is taken over by yet another new camp - the Super Moderns - the Deconstructivists. We look back upon the Modern Movement, that which was once claimed to be the final utopian realization of all building efforts. What happened to the quest of the Avant Garde?

KF: You're quite right to evoke or link Avant Garde to this issue. I do think that the Avant Garde is a specific historical category and in a profound sense it has to be linked to the idea of the Enlightenment, and to a certain extent, one could even say, to Utopian or Realistic positive concepts of progress in relation to the species, beings etc. I feel very strongly about the energy and power of the Modern Movement particularly within the integral period where it arose out of the fundamental conviction of the manifest destiny of the Enlightenment or of the Modern Project as Habermas has alluded to. They had a capacity to see the whole project of modernization in positive terms. That kind of conviction is lost historically, it's denied or precluded from this historical moment, because of the fact that modernization has continued and has proceeded at such a rapacious rate that it has had certain consequences which one can no longer look at as being necessarily positive. That whole question of the modern

project, has to be looked at in a much more complex way. Society in general has much more extensive reservations than was the case, let's say in 1925, or 1935, or even in 1945. This places the whole heritage of the Avant Garde in a peculiar light. It becomes more and more difficult to assume that one can simply continue with Avant Gardist strategies, but rather one really has to try to find other ways of developing culture. It is possible to talk about a super-animated Avant Gardism today, where the undertaking still has aspirations to be as radical, or as original as the first Avant Garde. But it, in a sense, not only ends up in a kind of repetition, even if it is a different repetition, to coin the term of Roland Barthes, but at the same time it is often disconnected, deliberately disconnected, but nevertheless, still disconnected from the imperatives of our historical realities and from the real situation of the still modernising society. From this point of view, this kind of continuation of Avant Gardism, with an emphasis upon the "ism", is in itself ambiguous. It's really a question as to whether it is Critical or Radical. One has to make very specific demands of it, to examine the discourse in a very specific way in order to make a judgement about it from the point of view of radical or critical culture, because it can also be seen as evasive. Late Avant Gardists' gestures can also be regarded as being evasive by not being radical, evasive vis-a-vis the actual historical state of modern society.

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