Re-Reading Critical Regionalism

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> "There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization."[1]

I have been reading, and re-reading, Kenneth Frampton's articles on Critical Regionalism since 1990, when I was first assigned *The Anti-Aesthetic – Essays on Postmodern Culture* as a new graduate student at Yale University. These articles are among a handful of most valued writings that have continued over time to engage, intrigue, at times to bemuse, and always to prompt my further contemplation. In the ensuing twenty-one years, my appreciation for Frampton's bold proposition, the evolution of its clarity, and his nuanced argumentation, has never waned. Despite its origin in reaction to very different architectural and intellectual circumstances, the veracity of its core substance remains undiminished, and finds new resonance and meaning today.

As a practice, the roots of Critical Regionalism, distinct from both vernacular and romantic regionalism, grew as tangents of late modernism. As a specific subject of architectural discourse, its genesis may be traced to the writings of Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, who first coined the term in 1981 in their seminal text, "The Grid and the Pathway".[2] Among the most provocative contributions toward the maturation of the discourse is surely the collection of essays constructed by Kenneth Frampton under several titles which included "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" and "Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic".[3]

In the "Six Points" and "Ten Points" essays, Frampton presents both context and specific polemics related to Critical Regionalism. The introductory "points" articulate the fundamental challenge of negotiating global and local circumstances in architectural practice. The introductory points set a broad field onto which a subsequent set of dialectical points are mapped. Each of the later points examines a pairing of dichotomous architectural practices; one practice embodies the humane and place-specific traits of Critical Regionalist architecture, while the second by contrast illustrates its less critical, and less regional counterpart. Experience and Information. Place and Space. The Architectonic and the Scenographic. The Natural and the Artificial. The Tactile and the Visual. The texts are adept in articulating the territory of the discourse, proposing many of its relevant terms, and setting out a primary objective:

> "The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place." [4]

I've long believed that the "project" of Critical Regionalism is unfinished. One wonders if the demise of Post-Modern domination in architectural discourse and practice diminished the pressure for a resistant "*arriere-garde*" architecture, in which case, the project may well have served its immediate critical purpose. Yet the clarity and validity of its central tenets seem still to resonate with great potential in current circumstances; they invite further pondering and speculation regarding their future architectural possibilities. The goal of this essay is not to track the evolution of Frampton's arguments, or to position Frampton within the larger historic discourse; nor is it to critique the details of his argument, or debate the significance of his highly influential texts. Rather, it is to employ Frampton's provocative framework as a field for further musing, and as a sieve with which to filter the ideas of others. One might speculate that such extensions were anticipated in the original texts, which thoroughly lay the ideological groundwork, but are more speculative regarding the detailed terrain of the dialectics; they gesture to key distinctions, but the frame is generally left open to further interpretation.

The scope of such a project is greater than the limits of a single essay. Consequently, three of the six dialectic points (from the "10 Points" essay) are chosen for further examination. The primary tenets of the points are recounted, and re-contextualized in light of current circumstances. Additional conceptual details, derived from the related architectural scholarship of others, is then appended to the points for further contemplation.

POINT FOUR: INFORMATION/EXPERIENCE[5]

> "In general, we have begun to lose our capacity for distinguishing between information and experience, not only in architecture but in everything else as well. Reality and irreality are deliberately confused and fused together."[6]

Frampton's concern with the increasing substitution of "information" for "experience" has three primary foci—the "irreality" of scenographic representations as proxy for materially substantive architecture, the substitution of mediating imagery for corporeal human experience, and the din of competing voices in the critical debates of the Post-Modern era. Together, these imply a certain diminution in the range of our human experiences, including a certain loss of contact or experience with the physical, the real, and the essential in the world. His precaution? Symbolic reference, critical discourse, and media are not sufficient substitutes for actual experience; our being in the real world must be recovered.

Circumstances have evolved with the passing of thirty years, and the "noise" surrounding Post-Modern debates and discord has quieted considerably. But the Post Modern legacy of insubstantial construction, compounded by the bewildering devolution of architectural symbols into nonsensical decoration, has not abated in the field of building construction. Critiquing an expanding genre of materially superficial work, and grieving the loss of architecture's true potential, Ada Louise Huxtable lamented:

> "Sidelined, trivialized, reduced to a decorative art or a developer's gimmick, characterized by a pastiche of borrowed styles and shaky, subjective references, it is increasingly detached from the problems and processes through which contemporary life and creative necessity are actively engaged. This is a dubious replacement for the rigorous and elegant synthesis of structure, art, utility, and symbolism that has always defined and enriched the building art and made it central to any civilized society."[7]

If, as Ada Louise Huxtable claims, *"We are what we build…"[8],* the constructional disintegrity of so many environments that we inhabit daily should give us nervous pause. For those inclined to examine things with any measure of attention, the contradiction between the appearance of objects and their indefinite materiality is disconcerting.

By comparison to scenographic building "information", we may contrast the experience of the real in architecture. "Buildings of the past convey another reality…"[9] according to Rafael Moneo. In his interview on the subject entitled, "The Idea of Lasting", he further observes: "In the past, the act of construction itself was conveying—or implying—the form and image of the building as one."[10] The idea of authentic consistency between appearance, form, purpose and materiality is among the distinguishing characteristics that draw our interest toward regional or vernacular architecture today. By contrast to instances of superficial architectural imagery, harmonious *consinitas* of substance and image are recognized as a deep quality in architecture—neither superficial or exchangeable as a wrapper of symbolic information, but integral to the body of the building, and by potential extension, to its site, its purpose, its materiality.

The condition of realness has special meaning for architects, as participants in its creation:

> "That is the pleasure of the building: to feel, somehow, in the process of making—even in the roughest way of solving problems—that the entire conception of the world is implicit. To experience and understand a building is to realize the continuity it proposes between an idea of the world and the construction itself. It speaks of the builder's understanding of the world—the way in which he wanted to understand the world. This communication allows us to appreciate the values and judgments of those who caused it to be built."[11]

This quality, described by Moneo as both consistency and authenticity, and much earlier by Frank Lloyd Wright as "integrity", must necessarily be present in Critical Regionalist architecture. The same characteristic was identified by Michael Benedikt simply as "realness" in his extended essay. *For an Architecture of Reality*. A distillation of his musings reads:

> "First, real architecture is architecture especially ready—so to speak—for its direct esthetic experience, an architecture that does not disappoint us by turning out in the light of that experience to be little more than a vehicle contrived to bear meanings. And second, real architecture, if it must inevitably be an architecture about something (at least from the perspective of a designer or critic) is about being (very) real. This if you will, is its "special aboutness."[12]

At its core, Benedikt's argument holds that architecture is not about other things—it is neither secondary nor mediatory as a vehicle to address other subject matter. It is complete—it is its own subject.

Nevertheless, in our extended deprivation from the real, have we lost the expectation of architecture to be authentic, and to contribute its own reality to the experience of our daily rituals? Faux environments may have damaged our recognition and judgment. But the ambiguity and confusion regarding the real are further exacerbated by the exponential encroachment of media and technology in our lives. We email, Skype, and text rather than converse face to face. Space and distance collapse as watch live streaming of wars, and view images of distant planets and cosmic events. Our sense of connection and proximity to places and people, and our perception of realness are inexorably altered. As we are more connected by media to a much wider world, the quieter realness of the "present" and immediate world can be forgotten, and overlooked.

In her essay, "The Return of the Real", Shiela Kennedy describes the effects of increasingly pervasive technology on our perception of the "real":

> "Notions about materiality are received and transmitted through film, television, internet and software programs, where the success of electronic games is measured by their relative degree of "reality". Mediated representations of tangible or haptic material qualities associated with the "real' may, in fact, be less than real, but the reality of their pervasive presence in our culture is undeniable in its impact."[13]

The nature and status of experience may be very different today than it was at the writing of the Critical Regional texts. Kennedy suggests that:

> "*The predicament of materiality today creates fundamental changes in the way materials are perceived, experienced and understood.*"[14]

Kennedy goes on to observe the following paradox:

> "Instead of replacing the physical world of materials, the virtual world produces a renewed desire for "realness" in materials. The desire for a new "materiality", for tactility and texture in consumer culture, is manifested in everything from fashion to furniture...Through the production of ever more numerous representations of materials, our culture's desires for materiality serve to distance us from those qualities that are "truly" material or unique only to the physical experience of materials. The representation of "materiality", the perception of qualities attributed to materials, and our understanding of what it means to be material are all integral parts of media culture."[15]

POINT FIVE: SPACE / PLACE[16]

> "The existential purpose of building (architecture) is therefore to make a site become a place, that is to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment."[17]

It is easier today more than ever to recognize the perpetuating dilemmas of place-lessness, identified in Frampton's dialectic of Place and Space. Frampton identified the threat of place-lessness in the undefined "spatium" of the contemporaneous urban "megalopolis", and appealed for resistance through the greater recognizability of "raum" or bounded space.[18] If the absence of "raum" and extensiveness of "spatium" are characteristic problems in dense cities, they are manifold in the ubiquitous sprawl of suburbs today. The unabated leveling of sites, stripped of all inconvenience or any identifying character are subdivided and metered by parcel, block, subdivision and thoroughfare for consumption. Endless rows of indistinguishable facades, contrived to represent a generically idealized image of house, are stitched at the seams by generic commercial strips of supersized mega stores and fast food chains. Acres are leveled; the built-landscape grows increasingly generic and indistinct—an unnatural "spatium" of leveled asphalt fields and roads, feeding an increasingly automobile-dependent society, and grinding away at a scarcity of local businesses. The suburban counterpart to agoraphobia must be characterized by the psychological conditions of confusion, fatigue, spatial hopelessness, and generalized anxiety at the feeling of being lost.

The monotonous spread of generic suburban landscapes across mountains and deserts, and from coast to coast confuses our sense of belonging to any specific or recognizable "place". More than ever, we may have lost even the memory of true difference in our built environments.

But Wal-Mart and McDonalds are straw dogs—neither controversial, nor likely candidates for redemption. Recovering distinguishability—Frampton's "place-form"—must nevertheless be one of the central tasks of Critical Regionalism. Channeling the contributors to phenomenology discourse adds emphasis, pointing to the fundamental human need for dwelling in places that are, to borrow from Christian Norberg-Schulz, "imagable".[19]

> "What, then, do we mean with the word 'place'? Obviously we mean something more than abstract location. We mean a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture, and color. Together these things determine an "environmental character," which is the essence of place."[20]

Adding to the concreteness of the material presence of a place is the inevitable sited-ness of architecture, which holds further clues for how we may contribute to "place".

> "Architecture is bound to situation. Unlike music, painting, sculpture, film, and literature, a construction (non-mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place. The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation."[21]

Examining the physical foundation of a place—natural and man-made conditions, specific land-form, the materiality of a natural environment or a culture of construction, vistas, specifics of climate and ecology, movement on a site—we can recognize each place as a unique amalgam of "concrete phenomena" of the "everyday life-world."[22] As well, we can search the specific potential of place at the different scales of region, context, site, or a material ground. Recognizing the less physically definitive, more intangibly experiential metaphysical distinctions demands our "being" in the world—in that place—and it presumably then also holds the potential for significant experience. The physical and metaphysical characteristics of a place are inevitably intertwined.

The natural and the man-made are also intertwined in our contribution to, and experience of, place-form. In different texts, Norberg-Schulz reflects on different ways that man-made places can be related to nature and the genius loci of the site. The first is way of relating is by "visualizing", wherein the human intervention adds greater precision to the understanding of nature and its "structures". The second way of relating is by "complementing", or adding what is perceived to be lacking or needed in the natural world for dwelling.[23] The third way of relating is by "symbolizing", or translating an "experienced meaning" in nature to a different medium, such as architecture. The fourth way is by "gathering" experienced meanings to create a concentrated, and concretized "microcosmos" of the world.[24] Reaction to place is neither neutral nor unselfconscious, but carries and indicates intentionality. Norberg-Schulz identifies these reactions and relations to nature as "general processes of settling", which are prerequisite to dwelling in a place; he ponders Heidegger's description of a bridge crossing between two banks as an illustration of these processes.

> "The bridge swings over the stream with ease and power. It does not just connect banks that are already there, the banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream...It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream."[25]

The example illustrates the potential and responsibility of the architectural to fuse and articulate meanings that clarify place. Norberg-Schulz attests: "The meaning of the landscape was 'hidden,' and the building of the bridge brings it out into the open."[26]

> "Building transcends physical and functional requirements by fusing with a place, by gathering the meaning of a situation. Architecture does not so much intrude on a landscape as it serves to explain it."[27]

Norberg-Schulz further cites "orientation" and "identification" as two psychological necessities to dwelling—orientation in knowing where one is, and identification in relating to how one is there—a perceived connection. In a generic landscape, one can neither orient nor dwell. All who have been hypnotized navigating stretches of undifferentiated commercial sprawl, or become hopelessly lost and locked amid twisting streets and cul-de-sacs with no escape, knows the sense of dis-orientation in a place-less environment. Orientation requires clarity, distinctions and difference in the environment, whereas identification requires a sense emotional familiarity—of belonging and being at home. Orientation and identification are both required for spatial imagability, which allows us to recognize a place, and further to connect and dwell within that place. Unique fusions of the physical and metaphysical, the natural and man-made contributed to such imagability.

> "Only if we succeed in substituting for the kind of dwelling that building Heidegger's farmhouse one genuinely of this age do we have a chance of arriving at an understanding of building that is not anachronistic."[28]

POINT 7: ARCHITECTONIC/SCENOGRAPIC[29]

The Post-Modern aspiration to revive a symbolic language for architecture, and in such to "speak" to its history and tradition was never self-consciously aimed at the superficial means of construction that were eventually prolific. While originally directed toward the resurrection of shared communication, the easy commodification of "imagistic" facades led to a pervasive "suppression of construction."[30] Stucco on foam proliferates still in commercial construction—the strip mall, the office park, and the suburban development. The current scenographic problem is insidious, widespread, and deeply uncritical by comparison to Post-Modernity; it rises from a supposed preference for the ornate in everyday building, and is surely in part due to its ease of construction and cheap cost. As hybrids of history and technology go, the decorated shed and stuccoed foam were a most unfortunate combination, which was likely among the downfalls of critical Post-Modernism in the sphere of architecture.

As a the counterproposal to the scenographic, with its ties to imagery, symbolic language and information, Frampton nominates architectonics as a primary mode and characteristic of architecture that resonates with his plea for "experience" and the real. Tectonics in architecture is "embodied in the revealed ligaments of the construction and the way in which the syntactical form of the structure explicitly resists the action of gravity."[31] Frampton intones the powers of the tectonic, reminding by way of Botticher that tectonic should not be confused with the merely technical.[32] The distinction is one of aspiration beyond purely utilitarian motives or functional performance. Unselfconscious technical building purports nothing, promises no extension of cultural or aesthetic values, and makes no presumptions about the possibility of creating, sustaining, or supporting greater significance in human activity. By contrast, expressive tectonics imply that "building" itself—its materiality, its joinery, its structure, construction and detailing—are raised to the level of an "art form". Such transformation results from the addition of energy, artistry, invention and intention, applied to reveal and a salient joint, the meeting of two materials, or a transfer of forces. The conscious intention toward re-presentation is proposed as the significant characteristic of tectonics. "The functionally adequate form must be adapted so as to give expression to its function."[33] It must function, but also amplify function.

But what more is implied by Critical Regionalist tectonics—the more delimited subset of the broader tectonic ideal? Returning to the idea that Critical Regionalism as a hybrid of the local / place-specific transformed by a more universal technology, speculation might begin with aspects of tectonics which can root in place—for example, the use of materials with some local genesis, hybridized by new technological constructional processes, or perhaps transformed at the root material level. Gerhard Auer's text, "Building Materials are Artificial by Nature" comes to mind in this regard. "Nature occupies herself with creating the elementary. Man, however, creates an infinite number of connections from these elementary things, although he is incapable of creating anything original."[34] Auer continues through the text to describe how any given material has not one nature, but six, each successively more manipulated than the last. The "first nature" of a material is its least-processed form, stacked or jointed, but worked very little to achieve a relatively primitive end. Through each successive nature, the material becomes more refined, further from its original state by way of modeling, cutting and polishing, physical transformation with other elements such as fire or water, alchemical transmutations, symbiotic hybrids, and finally biogenesis or chemical mechanics. All along, the material is present, though its physicality and potential are manifest very differently along the way. Reappearing in all these six states of its "nature" may be the material's color, its weight, its texture or smell, perhaps its scale or grain. One might compare each of the successive transformations as a hybrid facilitated by technology, in which the most raw material product is given new dimension, form, and potential, but at its most essential, remains resonant to its own chord. Employing a material with a regional root in another of its technically transmuted forms would be a defamiliarizing method with potential for Critical Regionalist practice.

At another scale, one degree larger than the raw material itself, is the tectonic—the poetic and expressive combination of materials in joints, surfaces, details, construction and structures. At this scale, the preceding example of the transforming natures of a material might give rise to different scales, different wall types, and different joinery in the tectonic construction. Or one might examine changed construction processes themselves for the transforming variable. When Louis I. Kahn remarked that a brick preferred to be employed in an arch, he may not have anticipated embedded bricks in precast panels, or the aluminum enframing of terra cotta units spaced by neoprene rather than mortar, or the thin brick, pressed into thermally and constructionally-efficient grooved insulation panels. The later raises a poignant problematic as to the breaking point of a hybrid, wherein universal technology has so undermined its original material or tectonic root that the significant linkage to its qualities and characteristics—weight, density, and gravity for example—have been lost.

The Scenographic / Architectonic dialectic illustrates the potential for great distance between appearance and actuality in architecture, as illustrated by the thin-brick on foam. In his article, "4 ways of being sensitive", Javier Mozas makes a humorous comparison to piteous attempts to relate to surroundings through naïve mimicry. Mozas recalled Woody Allen's character in the movie, *Zelig,* an involuntary chameleon whose personality, mannerisms, dress, and even speech would change in reaction to others around him. To be safe, loved, and accepted, Zelig would camouflage himself in an attempt to synchronize, to slip to a background position, or even disappear. "The eagerness to please, to go unnoticed, involves a forced adaptation, a premature aging, a journey through time, which transforms the original personality and stains it with the background color."[35]

Blending in, or disappearing into another time and place is neither critical, nor significantly responsive, nor very respectful of the time, place, or conditions that lent their inspiration. Critical Regionalism demands reflection on the difference between blended mimicry and defamiliarized transformation, hybridizing the local through the influence of universal technology. The thin brick may represent a technological advance, but it is a critical retreat more akin to scenography than the architectonics Critical Regionalism. Romantic sentimentality is not productive.

CONCLUSION

The project of Critical Regionalism seems to emerge in the present day with new potential and new urgency. As we increasingly recognize the magnitude of architecture's own contribution to global warming, and its unsustainable consumption of natural resources, alternatives to these practices must be developed. An architectural approach which combines the evolved intelligence of the local with the most effective capabilities of current technology must hold great sway. Kenneth Frampton's texts are critical, but they may also be instrumental in the development of architectural practices that revitalize local character and culture, intelligently engage the natural environment through low and high-tech means, and recover the humane experiential potential of architectural place-form.

ENDNOTES

1 Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", in *History and Truth,* trans. Chas. A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 277.

2 Kenneth Frampton attributes the first use of this term to Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in their 1981 essay "The Grid and the Pathway. An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and lSusana Antonakakis," *Architecture in Greece, 15* (Athens: 1981), 178.

3 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic – Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), and "Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic", in *Center Vol. 3: New Regionalism* (Austin: Center for American Architecture and Design, 1987).

4 Frampton, Six Points, 21.

5 Frampton, Ten Points, 24-25.

6 Frampton, Ten Points, 24.

7 Ada Louise Huxtable, "Introduction" in *The Unreal America Architecture and Illusion*, (New York: The New Press, 1997), 9.

8 Huxtable, *Unreal*.

9 Rafael Moneo, “The Idea of Lasting – A Conversation with Rafael Moneo”, *Perspecta The Yale Architectural Journal,* (New Haven: Perspecta Inc./ Rizzoli, 1988),147.

10 Moneo, Lasting, 147.

11 Moneo, Lasting, 156.

12 Michael Benedikt, *For an Architecture of Reality,* (New York: Lumen Books, 1987), 30.

13 Shiela Kennedy, “Material Presence – The Return of the Real”, *a+t Sensitive Materials II,* (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain: a+t ediciones, 2000), *18.*

14 Kennedy, Material, *18.*

15 Kennedy, Material, *18.*

16 Frampton, Ten Points, 25.

17 Christian Norberg Schulz, “The Phenomenon of Place”, in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 422-26.

18 Frampton references Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971), 154.

19 Norberg Schulz, Phenomenon, 422-26.

20 Norberg Schulz, Phenomenon, 422-26.

21 Steven Holl, *Anchoring* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), 9.

22 Introduced first by Husserl in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental* Phenomenology, referenced by Norberg-Schulz, Phenomenon, 414.

23 Norberg Schulz, Phenomenon, 422-26.

24 Norberg Schulz, Phenomenon, 422-26.

25 Heiddeger, Dwelling, .

26 Norberg Schulz, Phenomenon, 422-26.

27 Holl, *Anchoring*, 9.

28 Karsten Harries, “Space and Place” in *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 168.

29 Frampton, Ten Points, 25-26.

30 Frampton, Ten Points , citing Marco Frascari, 26.

31 Frampton, Six Points, 27.

32 Frampton, Six Points, 27.

33 Stanford Anderson, “Modern Architecture and Industry: Peter Behrens, the AEG, and Industrial Design,” Oppositions 21 (Summer 1980), p. 83.

34 Gerhard Auer, Building Materials are Artificial by Nature.” *Diadalos 56*, (London: Gordon+Breach Publishing, 1995), 20-35.

35 Javier Mozas, “4 ways of being sensitive” in *a+t Sensitive Materials I* (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain: a+t ediciones, 1999), 3-4.