The Figure of Knowledge

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CHAPTER 10

Critical Regionalism: A not so Critical Theory

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One year after the much disputed *Strada Novissima* at the Venice Biennale in 1980, which promoted history as one of the chief actors in conceiving of architecture and its meaningfulness, a new concept proposed a different way to deal with the same idea of architectural meaning.

Labelled “critical regionalism,” the new concept appeared as a response to Paolo Portoghesi’s installation (and its misuses of history), but, above all, as a solution to the ongoing architectural crisis. Its criticality was to be understood particularly in this sense: an upgraded version of historic regionalism, called upon to fight the causes of the persisting architectural crisis, as well as its devious byproducts, such as postmodernism and its decried use of history.

If critical regionalism proved to be a pervasive, if not powerful tendency, it succeeded thanks to a carefully crafted theory, built up through a series of programmatic texts whose various authors (historians and critics) turned the new current into a major expression of contemporary architectural thinking. I will explore here how this theoretical apparatus was shaped, by briefly considering its prehistory (as a legitimizing starting point) and by analysing its further development through the contributions of the major figures of critical regionalism. By doing so, I will interrogate the very construction of the concept (which one may term a “travelling concept,” problematic in that it is not fully assimilated, or too diluted),¹ in order to decipher the agenda of the statements at stake. Focusing on the epistemological construction – on the background of an abridged chronological evolution, which might give the impression of a linear narrative – and on its inconsistencies will allow me to address the question of how “critical” critical regionalism actually was.
(Re)considering regionalism

It is a shortcut of modernist historiography to present modernism and regionalism as two opposed stances. Certainly, several reasons led to the establishment of this shortcut, the apex being most probably the clash between the two at the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life (Paris, 1937), whereby modernist architecture was relegated to a secondary position by the monumental neoclassicism of the main building and the picturesqueness of the Centre régional.2

Thus, it might have appeared as paradoxical when the most significant actors of the Western architectural scene gathered in the wake of World War II in a symposium organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) to consider how regionalism could rescue modernism.3 Propelled by a chronicle Lewis Mumford had published a few months before in The New Yorker,4 the symposium frontally addressed the question of modern architecture’s crisis, thought to originate in its capacity (or lack thereof) to convey expressiveness and a certain humanism. Mumford’s essay addressed this issue, noting that there was an ongoing change both in Europe and America which proved that modern architecture was “past its adolescent period” and “its assertive dogmatism,” that it was ready to go beyond the machine. As an example, he pointed to the Bay Region style, “a free yet unobtrusive expression of the terrain, the climate, and the way of life on the Coast,” insisting on how such an architecture could provide a “native and human form of modernism.”5

As the debates revealed the lack of meaningfulness as the most critical problem of the crisis of modern architecture, the logical remedy, according to historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, was to enhance its capacity to convey “expressiveness.”6 In his intervention to the symposium, Hitchcock singled out several architectural expressions, insisting on two of them, namely “monumentality” and “domesticity,” both directions to be massively explored in the postwar years. Theorized in the early 1940s by Sigfried Giedion, with Josep Lluís Sert and Fernand Léger, and debated in a 1948 special issue of The Architectural Review (responding somehow to the MoMA symposium), monumentality would embrace several different paths in the coming decades, often flirting with history.7 As for what Hitchcock called “domesticity,” it evolved in a straight connection with the concept of site (understood as an inhabited place), rekindling many of the (forgotten) values of regionalism. Labelled as “new” or, later, “critical” in order to distinguish it from its (banned) historic form, this rekindled regionalism was to be developed as a “humanized” modernism.

This might be seen as the beginning of the travelling journey of the concept of critical regionalism. The MoMA symposium marked a (pre)founding moment, which cut – implicitly or explicitly – the connections with the history of architectural regionalism, a move that would later affect its (travelling) legacy.
(New/critical) regionalism reloaded: An incomplete brief history

The paradox of the MoMA symposium embracing regionalism was all too obvious, and several of the participants knew it very well. When presented with the “novelty” of the Bay Region style, Walter Gropius manifested his surprise, stating that expressing the terrain, the climate, and the way of life was “almost precisely, in the same words, the initial aim of the leading modernists in the world twenty-five years back.”

That modernism and regionalism were not that irreconcilable was an unspoken truth. The connection with the site and its materiality, the interest in tradition as transmission of an essential architectural thinking was interpreted in various degrees and various manners by several main figures of modern architecture, from Adolf Loos to Le Corbusier, from Marcel Breuer to the Spanish GATEPAC or the Italian group around Giovanni Pagano, to name only few. But if the concern already existed, it had little – if any – theoretical grounding. This latter developed progressively by numerous contributions that laid, often disparately, such theoretical foundations.

One of the most influential in this sense was Martin Heidegger’s lecture at the Darmstadt Fifth Colloquium in 1951. Arguing that space does not have a value per se if it is not understood as place, that is, in its multilayered physicality and spirituality, Heidegger’s discourse was perceived by the architects attending the colloquium as a leading thread. Its inspirational impact was particularly instrumental for the further development of two architectural directions, which were to evolve in close proximity: regionalism (in its critical version) and phenomenology.

The notions of place and dwelling were already of interest to the architectural community. Three years after the Darmstadt lecture, two historians addressed them in their own manner: Sigfried Giedion exhorted a “new regionalism” while Sibyl Moholy-Nagy praised “anonymous architecture.” Both texts introduced several pivotal elements for the future discourse on critical regionalism: the input of the regional diversity, the connection with the site, the necessity to understand space as place, and the importance of tradition seen as continuity.

Written as a militant text, Giedion’s essay represented an updated alternative to his previous engagement with “New Monumentality.” The historian saw in the “new regionalism” a “developing trend,” explaining it as a space-time conception, whose motivating force was the “respect for individuality and [the] desire to satisfy the emotional and material needs of the area” and finally “cosmic and terrestrial conditions.” The new trend was described as a clear acknowledgement of otherness, both because of its relation to “the so-called ‘technically underdeveloped areas’” and of its attempt to repair the long-lasting injustice of a dominating Western culture. For its part, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy’s “anonymous architecture” provided another point of view on otherness and marginality. In her essay, she
analysed the vernacular examples from the Heideggerian perspective of the connection between man and his site and recommended them as a source of inspiration for contemporary architects. According to Moholy-Nagy, vernacular and the tradition it encapsulated were the closest to an essential thinking in architecture.

Attempting to look beyond the Western architecture, Giedion and Moholy-Nagy aimed in fact to infuse meaning to this latter. Meaning would be precisely one of the key notions debated by numerous architectural publications. Among these, the journal *Perspecta* played a decisive role by introducing Heidegger, through Kenneth Frampton and Christian Norberg-Schulz, to a large architectural audience, thus preparing the scene for the emergence of new sensibilities, able to “deal with the progressive disenchantment of the world.”

When critical regionalism was launched as a concept in 1980-1981, its positioning took advantage of both a certain existing familiarity with the issues it would convey and of the novelty of its being wrapped up in a new packaging. The concept was launched by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre through two texts – “Die Frage des Regionalismus” and “The Grid and the Pathway” – to be considered later as the founding texts of critical regionalism. Before they came up with the label, Tzonis and Lefaivre guest-edited a special issue of *Le Carré Bleu* in 1980, overtly attacking historicism as the central source of crisis in contemporary architecture. In their introductory essay, they sketched a possible alternative to all these recent deviations; unnamed as yet, this alternative was referred to simply as “the new architecture.”

The same year, while a student at Harvard and working under Tzonis, Anthony Alofsin wrote “Constructive Regionalism,” a plea for a nuanced understanding of regionalism as composed of a multitude of meanings. The young Alofsin expressed his “hope” that “an incisive clarity would render regionalism a constructive tool in the production of architecture.”

What happened next is easily imaginable: Tzonis and Lefaivre replaced “constructive” with “critical” – a highly hot term and attitude at the time – thus finding a name for their “new architecture” and at the same time coining a label that would become iconic. The iconicity of the latter was to further increase when the concept was embraced by Kenneth Frampton in 1983.

The consecration: Pomona meeting

But what turned critical regionalism into a real concept (though it was the third stage of its journey as I have followed it here), akin to a paradigm, was the so-called Pomona meeting.

Organized in 1989 by Spyros Amourgis, the event was presented as “The First International Colloquium on Critical Regionalism” and aimed to proclaim
the new current as the architectural path to be followed, both for its ethical values
and its long-lasting legitimacy. As Marvin Malecha, dean of the Pomona College of
Environmental Design, remarked in his preface to the proceedings, the colloquium
was “not so much about a new movement as about the renaissance of long-forgot-
ten values.”\(^{17}\) In his view, there was an urgent need to revive the latter in order to
again include “the social imperatives in the process of design” and thus to forge a
“coherent philosophy” for a new architecture.

That was precisely Amourgis’s goal, who deplored the “formalistic approach
and narrowing perspective of architectural ideology” that led, according to him,
“to a search for security in the past and the coalescence of the ‘Strada Novissima’
of the Venice Biennale.”\(^{18}\) As Amourgis noted, the real problem was not history, but
the lack of an appropriate study of it, resulting in a young generation “historically
confused and with misconceptions about the modern legacy.” Deprived of philo-
sophical training, young architects were thus left “ideologically naked.”

In this context of theoretical emergency, critical regionalism was presented as
“the first theoretic statement since the last meeting of Team X,” which recom-
manded it as the valid alternative to the confusion ruling over the architectural
field. The meeting acknowledged Lefaivre and Tzonis as the generators of critical
regionalism’s theoretical foundations, while presenting Frampton as the creator
of an “embryonic canon,” with his list of six points offered as a definition of the
current.

The discussions outlined several important features for defining critical region-
alism: its relation to the place (understood as a complex concept bringing together
context, environment, history, and culture), its criticality (both against “meaning-
less modernization” and “vernacular sentimentalism”), and, above all, its capa-
city to signify. While the latter appeared as the main scope to be pursued – “the
continuation of this discourse in search of meaning” – it was obvious that the
speakers had different understandings of what this meant. Amourgis singled out
three tendencies in his introduction to the proceedings, emphasizing either the
environment, the historic and cultural values, or the social ones. And he insisted on
the different orientation of the speakers from the “Old World” and those from the
“New World”: the first favoured the “ingrained historic roots and values,” while the
second privileged “the natural environment as a predominant reference system.”
The cover of the proceedings enhanced this theoretical haziness: surprisingly for a
colloquium held in California, home of the Bay Region Style, the new current was
represented by the Torre Velasca in Milan.

However, as stated by Tzonis and Lefaivre during the meeting,\(^{19}\) critical region-
alism was expected to leave behind any possible dissonances and go beyond its
natural (and regrettable) attachment to identity issues in order to be able to respond
to global problems.
Theorizing critical regionalism

By making this statement, Tzonis and Lefaivre clearly intended to project critical regionalism onto the international scene, pushing it outside its somehow obvious role of a niche architecture for “so-called ‘peripheral’ regions.” They insisted on this position particularly because the global problems they referred to, “anomy and atopy,” were, in their view, most urgent in “superdeveloped parts of the world.”

From this perspective, which set an ambitious agenda for critical regionalism, it was imperative to theorize it and at the same time demonstrate that its capacity of meaning was the opposite of postmodernism’s irresponsible use of symbols. This somehow echoed Karsten Harries’s reflection on meaning in architecture and authenticity (the topic of the 1983 Perspecta issue), that he understood as a matter of recovering “architecture’s natural symbols” instead of “play[ing] with the symbols of the past.”

Aiming to proclaim critical regionalism as the solution to the architectural crisis, Tzonis and Lefaivre endeavoured both to define its criticality and to shape a consistent narrative of its historicity. This latter, covering the entire history of architecture, from Vitruvius and the primitive huts to contemporary examples, was meant not only to state the legitimacy of regionalism but also to dispel any possible controversy related to it. Hence, Tzonis (in charge of the historical discourse) condemned most of the nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century regionalist architectures for being “chauvinistic” and manipulative in their use of history. By doing so, he perpetuated the cliché of a conflictual relationship between modern and regionalist architecture. Being afraid of possible misappropriations of the term, he insisted on its resignification, while providing a mystified narrative of its former use: “Regionalism was not the term that architects themselves were referring to. It was a conceptual device that we choose to use as a tool of analysis. To make the argument more accurate and explicit we combined the concept of regionalism with the Kantian concept critical.” Moreover, he confessed that together with Lefaivre, they thought to go even further: “we even publicly suggested that the concept of regionalism should be abandoned and replaced by realism, hereby erasing the middle part of re-‘gion’-alism.”

Introducing the notion of realism into the equation was a clever move, which was actually already anticipated by Frampton in 1981: it meant not only that the new current inherited one of the major modernism’s principles (essential for the very doctrine of the twentieth-century modernity, as explains Alain Badiou) but also that it reflected the new ways of understanding “reality.” Additionally, it was a manner for Tzonis and Lefaivre to affirm their reformist convictions, by challenging the existing hegemonies: “Realism was highly appropriate in reflecting a commitment to the exploration of the identity of the particular (of each case), rather
than the generalities of the doctrines.”

Alleviated from its picturesque hollow frivolity (staged since the 18th century) and from its “chauvinistic” bias (related to nationalist claims), critical regionalism was ready to endorse the role of the perfect rescue solution. Not just a providential solution, but the right answer for actual needs, since it solved the architectural crisis by mediating “the impact of universal civilisation with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place.”

Tzonis and Lefaivre borrowed this last statement from Kenneth Frampton, whom they acknowledged in Pomona as “the critic whose writings have helped raise and spread the issue of Critical Regionalism more than any other in the last ten years.” Indeed, starting with his “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism” published in the 1983 issue of *Perspecta* on authenticity, Frampton imposed himself as a theoretical authority of the new current. His positioning, soon to be endorsed by the very wide readership of his *Critical History of Modern Architecture*, was founded on a twofold approach. On the one hand, he built his theoretical apparatus on strong philosophical references, such as Heidegger’s distinction between space and place, Hannah Arendt’s “space of public appearance,” and Paul Ricœur’s reading of a “hybrid world culture” as a cross fertilisation between rooted culture and universal civilisation. Building on these references, Frampton imagined critical regionalism as a “culture of resistance,” one which is dialectical and fights against a centric discourse, seeking to “self-consciously … 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.”

Such a reading enabled the historian to situate critical regionalism and to distinguish it both from former regionalist expressions (the simplistic evocation of a sentimental vernacular) and from current possibly related architectures (the demagogic populism and the ironical use of the vernacular).

On the other hand, Frampton reinforced the impact of his theoretical construct by translating it into an articulated scheme. He introduced this scheme already in 1983, presented as “six points for an architecture of resistance,” analysing the substance of critical regionalism through a series of notions: culture and civilisation/ the rise and fall of the avant-garde/ critical regionalism and world culture/ the resistance of the place-form/ culture versus nature: topography, context, climate, light, and tectonic form / visual versus tactile. Expanded to ten points, and further on reduced to five couples of opposed notions – space-place / typology-topography / architectonics-scenography / artificial-natural / visual-tactile – the scheme appears as a manifesto, clearly alluding to Le Corbusier’s “five points towards a new architecture” (1927).

But while complexifying the notion of resistance, in explicit opposition to the domination of a hegemonic discourse, Frampton progressively internalised his
understanding of critical regionalism. He accomplished this shift in a 1990 essay that went far beyond the limits of critical regionalism in its attempt to recover the essence of architecture as both practice and discipline.32 The new concept Frampton forged for the occasion, the “poetics of construction,” allowed a different angle for fighting futility in architecture (“resist the contemporary tendency to reduce architecture to scenographic efforts”), grounding in a more consistent manner the lasting values of the discipline. By taking this shift, the historian at the same time reinforced his belief that critical regionalism should be seen as an attitude and not as a matter of style, expanding through the idea of grounding both its materiality and its spirituality. This subtle displacement in Frampton’s approach, comparable to Juhani Pallasmaa’s exhortation in favour of a “regionalism of the mind” instead of a geographical one,33 signalled already a fissure in the foundations of critical regionalism.

A problem? Is there a problem?

Despite their relatively different positions – Frampton more on a theoretical ground and Tzonis and Lefaivre more as “hagiographers” – the three main defenders of critical regionalism aimed to reach a similar goal. Defending its agenda went beyond an “ideological taxonomy”34 or a simple remapping of the architectural landscape; what they hoped for was to reframe the values of (contemporary) architecture and, as a consequence, to reframe the historiographical discourse. But as Keith Egggener noted in his “critique against critical regionalism,” this discourse laid on a problematic intellectual construct.35 The historiographic reframing appeared to be less efficient than imagined, showing signs of malfunctioning on multiple levels. The first problem could be seen in the very fact that, while attempting to reform architectural historiography, critical regionalism was not a historiographic category but rather a label forged on the scene (and in the context) of architectural criticism. This uncontrolled displacement from concept to labelling opened the door both to a misuse of the notion (by its authors and its further adepts) and a loss of its working force. Frampton seemed aware of this danger, hence his thorough labour on the theoretical background followed by the eventual shift to tectonics, which he thought to be a more powerful category for embodying a culture of resistance.36 On their side, Tzonis and Lefaivre attempted to avoid a heuristic problem by articulating their narrative via two distinctive voices – Tzonis embracing regionalism as a resilient flow running through the entire history of architecture with Lefaivre anchoring it in the present of architectural criticism.37 But if this twofold approach succeeded in dissimulating the clash between the two different epistemological logics of history and criticism, it could not solve
the confusion created by the conflation between meaning and intention, two key elements in assessing regionalism.

On the front of peripheral architectural production, the historiographic impact of critical regionalism appeared as even more problematic. While defending peripheries, critical regionalism reinforced their geopolitical belonging, stressing their marginality. As a niche narrative of alternativeness, it was reduced to a mere ply within the manifold discourse of an illusionary global history of architecture; meanwhile its intended particularization singularised yet again peripheries for their specificities. Furthermore, their differences could be perceived as a cultural marketing in the context of late capitalism. Commenting on the strange crisscrossing between technology and authenticity – brought together since Giedion’s “new regionalism” – Alan Colquhoun remarked when the concept was launched that what was celebrated through critical regionalism “would seem to be more the loss of authenticity than its recovery.”

Indeed, the very theorization of critical regionalism came from a central position, which ironically resumed a certain intellectual colonisation in terms of architectural thinking.

To conclude: A disputable criticality

The theoretical bubble produced around critical regionalism attempted to embody both more and less than it actually entailed. Fuelled by a background of crisis, critical regionalism involved a militant dimension, explicit since the first writings attempting to theorize it: Frampton made clear his position defining it as a “call to arms.” “New” and later “critical” regionalism were presented as a “good” architecture, as opposed to a “bad” architecture, this latter embodied alternatively (or altogether) by the devious tendencies in contemporary practice and/or the hegemonic discourse attempting to flatten architectural thinking. Paradoxically enough, the bubble around critical regionalism has undoubtedly contributed to this flattening, through its shift into a highly fashionable phenomenon (nurtured, constituting another paradox, by Tzonis’s and Lefaivre’s writings).

But the disputable criticality of critical regionalism has its origin in its misformulation. On the one hand, the longue durée defended by Tzonis and Lefaivre managed to create the illusion of a travelling concept, thus concealing its indefectible connection with modernity, and more precisely with the modernist crisis, whose mutations were in fact responsible for the urge for a “meaningful” architecture. On the other hand, the condemnation of “historical” regionalism – reduced to its historicist aesthetic and its nationalist claims – engendered a misunderstanding of the current, which emerged as a critical response from the very beginning, without waiting for
the modernist crisis to posit itself critically. Hence, though “critical” appeared as an instrumental notion for defining critical regionalism, the term suddenly faded. Insisting on the historicity of an unchangeable idea, Tzonis and Lefaivre dropped it and went back to the generic “regionalism.” Frampton went also beyond the labelling, either turning critical regionalism into a mere facet of his more complex “constructed poietics” or rephrasing it as “the salient importance of landscape.”

Seen from these entangled perspectives, critical regionalism seemed to have failed its role of providential solution, proving to be a mere “refolution,” to paraphrase Charles Jencks. Ironically enough, Jencks used this invented term, borrowing it from the political scientist Timothy Garton Ash, to comment on postmodernism as “critical modernism.”

I would argue that critical regionalism could be seen as a version of this critical modernism. When the concept was launched, it aimed to save the modernist doctrine and to legitimize it on a renewed basis. Hence its stubbornness to fight history – modernism’s main adversary. Eggener actually related the arrival of critical regionalism on the architectural scene to the rise of resurgent nationalism worldwide. From Giedion to Tzonis and Lefaivre, and partially to Frampton, the doctrine of the renewed regionalism was explicitly shaped against the resurfacing of history in architecture. Fighting against historicist excesses and its formalist approaches (what Frampton labelled as “scenography”) was finally a manner of evacuating history through geography, a way of opposing the vertical hegemony of History (in the Hegelian sense) with the embracing horizontality of Geography (as a Herderian response) – culture versus civilisation.

So perhaps critical regionalism was less an architecture of resistance than an architecture meant to provide resistance – a disguised manner of keeping a certain hegemonic discourse alive.

Notes


5. My emphasis.

6. [MoMA], “What is Happening to Modern Architecture?” 299.


Szacka, examines the canonical role of Kenneth Frampton’s concept of “Critical Regionalism,” reaching beyond its traditional interpretation.

16. Of Greek origin, Spyros Amourgis was an architect and planner who rotated between Greece, Great Britain, and the US. His involvement with the Pomona meeting might be understood as a consequence of the “Greek connection” opened by Tzonis and Lefaivre through their article “The Grid and the Pathway.” As a matter of fact, Amourgis himself seemed to have been already sensitized to the dialogue between architecture and its site, as one of the positions he occupied in Greece was as a secretary general for the National Tourist organization (http://www.rethinkathenscompetition.org/uploads/juries-2nd/Amourgis%20CV.pdf, retrieved September 5, 2019). This sensibility was probably enhanced while in Pomona, surrounded by the examples of the Bay Region style.


isme au post-modernisme,” where he already associated it to a “subtle and stubborn resistance.”


29. Frampton, “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism.”


43. Egggener, “Placing Resistance.”
