Reaction or Synthesis: The Modern Opposition of Place and Space in Architecture

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In contemporary life, popular longing for the familiarity of local communities has become so commonplace that many wonder how moderns were ever attracted to the universal abstractionsof urban space. Only sixty years ago, however, the romantic concept of local community was so devalued in architecture and social science that it was a field of interest primarily to those on the radical right. The opposition of *place* and space, or of regionalism and internationalism, in Western architecture is a central dualism of modernity. We have imagined that the propinquity of the traditional village is inalterably opposed to the liberative potential of Cartesian space.

The purpose of this paper is first, to examine the historical



Figure 1: The Town of Melsungen; Hessen, Germany. Source: Robert R. Taylor, *The Word* in *Stone: The Role of Architecture in National Socialist Ideology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), plate 2. The volkish notion of "community" invoked by German National Socialism relied upon the myth of a local, and exclusive, *genius loci*. The preservation of such social settings as Melsungen was synonymous with the preservation of German genius.

opposition of regionalist and internationalist architecture and second, to seek a synthesis between these two seemingly opposed principles. In order to make my analysis concrete, I will examine two contemporary cases of architecture in the American South that make the claim of synthesis: Seaside, Florida (as an example of neo-traditional architecture), and Blueprint Demonstration Farm at Laredo, Texas (as an example of critical regionalism). Both exemplars employ regionalist ideologies. Seaside is ideologically regional in that its well publicized codes rely upon the vernacular and localized classical types. Blueprint farm is ideologically regional in that the means of its production emerge from local ecological and labor conditions. Both projects also make internationalist claims. The codes of Seaside are inspired by the universal canons of classicism. Similarly, the "biom-metric" methodology of Blueprint Farm relies upon the global classifications of bio-geography. In spite of these similarities, I will argue that, at Seaside, the attempt to synthesize the local and the universal fails. Neotraditionalism remains within the modern opposition of space and place. At Blueprint Farm, however, a "nonmodem" synthesis is (almost) achieved.3

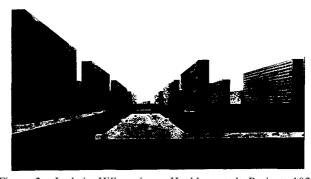


Figure 2: Ludwig Hilberseimer, Hochhausstadt Project, 1924. Source: Richard Pommer, David Spaeth, and Kevin Harrington, *In the Shadow of Meis: Ludwig Hilberseimer, Architect, Educator, and Urban Planner* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago in Association with Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1988), pp. 17. The architecture of neue sachlichkeit was less about functionalism than a representation of the endless seriality of democratic space. In such a world, no place is privileged.

2.0 THE MODERN DUALISM

Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre have traced the opposition between the local and the universal in architecture back to Vitruvius' Ten Books of *Architecture*.⁴ The modem discourse which opposes these principles is only the most recent chapter in that long history. The geographer, John Agnew, has argued that, in modernist thought, the concept of place, or region, was devalued for two reasons:⁵

First, modem social science has confused, or conflated, the distinction between "place" and "community." "Community," in the modem view, is assumed to define both "a physical setting for social relations" and "a morally valued way of life." In the conflation, place has been mistakenly equated with local concepts oftraditional morality. Modernist thought, argues Agnew, fails to understand society as a dynamic process. As a result, modems tends to reify (or, thing-ify) moral concepts as places.

Second, beginning in the 19th-century—a period that witnessed the dramatic evaporation of traditional communities--social scientists attempted to project the trajectory of history. Common to all of these a priori projections was the polarity of "community" and "society." Writers as dissimilar as Spencer and Marx saw community as being "coercive, limiting, or idiotic," whereas national societies were characterized as liberative. Conservatives, such as Comte, saw the loss of traditional village forms as the loss of the ideal social type. In contrast, the politics of nation-building and the liberative project of Enlightenment, became an ideology of a "antitraditionalism." To free humans from feudal bonds to the land, and the hierarchical relations inscribed there, was understood by modems to be the grand scheme (or teleology) of history. The Germans have conceptualized this historical tension as the transformation of gemeins chaft into gesells chaft.

These two forces—the reification of moral codes and the teleology of history---conspired to devalue place, or region, as a concept relevant to the conditions of modem life. "Becoming 'modem' involves casting off ties to place (in work, recreation and sense of identity) and adopting an 'achievement oriented' or 'class conscious' self that is placeless." Agnew argues, in concert with Edward Soja, that the devaluation of place was most vigorously promoted by Marxist ideology.' For Marxists to consider social behavior as in any way place-based would have been to invert the order of causality. Marxian logic has traditionally held that material order arises from social activity, not the reverse. In the eyes of the left, the opposing doctrine of environmental determinism, (which holds that societies owe their unique character to the conditions of their territory) amounts to nothing less than racism and the fetishization of place.8

The contemporary Marxist Geographer, David Harvey, has been particularly unrelenting in his vilification of regionalist sentiments. For Harvey, any deviation from the internationalist project of Becoming-in-space leads directly to the principles, if not the practices, of fascism. He reasons that to privilege Being-the spatialization of human rela-

tions--over Becoming--the decontextualization of human relations by time--is to fall into the trap set by Heidegger. Harvey finally embraces the radical "unreality of place" as the false consciousness of those who oppose the "unity between peoples." The unreality of Bosnia as a place may serve as a tragic example of Harvey's worst fears. Although bounded places may be familiar and comforting to those who identify with the "law of the land," the (re)description of boundaries may operate as a device to exclude and cleanse Others from our midst. ¹⁰ The cultural politics of regionmaking are rarely benign.

Among modem architects, Le Corbusier was perhaps the most vehement critic of regionalist sentiments. The "picturesque regionalism" of Camillo Sitte, mourned Le Corbusier in 1925, and "this touching renaissance of the home ... was destined grotesquely to divert architecture from its proper path."" Le Corbusier's ironic reference to the "home" is a classic example of the reification of traditional moral codes. His reference to the "proper path" of architecture is likewise a reproduction of the modem teleology of history. Le Corbusier's internationalist program embodied precisely those attitudes that Agnew has identified as having devalued the concept of place in modernist thought.

Postmodern discourse, however, would invert Le Corbusier's program. Thinkers as dissimilar as Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo argue that we architects must give up our First Principles, our Gods, our Master Plans, and retum to the understandable intimacy of local conditions. They argue that the totalizing projects of modernism are deeply, and inherently, flawed. To imagine we have the rational capacity to Plan human societies in the abstract conditions of Cartesian space is not a symptom of modem injustice and chaos; it is the cause. In this postmodern view, the tragedy of Bosnia is only the return of the repressed. The Master Plan of Yugoslavia has resulted, not in the "unity between peoples" (as Harvey had hoped) but, in the tribalization of place as ethnic territory.

The modem privileging of space over place has devalued regionalism, only to see local values reemerge as a powerful force in postmodern architecture. In the view of Tzonis and Lefaivre, architecture has served as the "memory machine" of political history—a device that "triggers" the familiar events of collective memory. In this context, regional architecture has been a conservative (and sometimes positive) force, resistant to the a priori plans of internationalism. To the degree that postmodem formulations of place rely solely upon cultural familiarity, however, they serve to reproduce the conservative mission of place—to prop up the authority of the self-selected with the doctrines of environmental determinism.

My thesis here is that conservative postmodems have appropriated, and merely inverted, the logic by whichmoderns have devalued the concept of place. First, the conflation of "place" and "community" has not been untangled by postmodern thought--postmodems have simply embraced the moral codes that have been so objectionable to modems.

Second, although progressive postrnoderns (such as Gianni Vattimo) have abandoned the very idea of History, conservatives (Leon Krier for example) have simply adopted *neo*-traditional ideology in the place of anti-traditional ideology. No regions, all regions, what's the difference? To remain within the force-field spun by modernity, and to invert the poles, is only to be anti-modem.

3.0 REACTION OR SYNTHESIS?

According to Kurt Anderson, Seaside, the much published icon of Neo-traditionalism designed by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (DPZ), is a new "planning paradigm" for America. The "paradigm" so lauded by Anderson relies upon two codes. The first, or "urban code," defines property, density, circulation, and building use types. Most planners agree that the simplicity of DPZ's urban code has provided a much needed critique of suburban planning models. The second, or "architectural code," is, however, a far less convincing recuperation of pre-suburban typologies. This code, rather than promoting sustainable design strategies, promotes the reproduction of traditional architectural motifs for their scenographic value. Anderson, far from being apologetic for mere image-making, delights in the recuperation of "a 'lunder, gentler' model for the future which portends 'a return to hearth and home'.""

In response to Seaside's critics on the left, Anderson retorts:

"Of course Seaside is fundamentally an exercise in nostalgia, seeking (like practically every other suburb in the country) to indulge middle class America's pastoral urges. The miracle is that (unlike practically any other suburb in the country) it manages to conjure the good old days impeccably, solidly, jauntily, even profoundly."

The claim to profundity does not obscure the reactionary

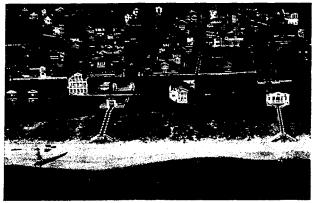


Figure 3: Seaside, Florida by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (DPZ). Source: David Mohney and Keller Easterling, eds., *Seaside: Making a Town in America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), 76. The comforting familiarity of Seaside is an attempt to recoup the lost grace that so many in America mourn. Postmoderns imagine that social grace can be reenacted in the proper setting.

content of Anderson's message. In his view, acts of "nostalgia" need only be performed "impeccably" to legitimize their mission of reversal. Explicit in his admiration of Seaside is a return to the presumed grace of "the good old days" found inscribed in the forms of "hearth and home." I will argue, however, that it is not the forms of Seaside that are so admired by neo-traditionalists. Rather, it is the structure of social relations represented in the classical-vernacular forms ordered by DPZ's architectural code that is so admired. The simulation of the local places mourned by Comte is a thinly veiled attempt to recoup the grace and privilege of those who would reside at the top of traditional hierarchies. Anderson, like Comte, conflates social and architectural typology.

In the realm of reactionary cultural politics, however, Andres Duany is not to be outdone. In the role of the long lost feudal "Prince," Duany heroizes ...

"...developers: they are the best kind of clients, because they have a great deal of power over place, power equivalent to the autocracies of the past History shows that you have concentrate power to achieve decisive physical form, and developers are the people who currently hold such power in the United States." ¹⁶

Well, so much for the Enlightenment project of liberation from bondage to Place and Prince. In Duany's world of "decisive physical form," gone too is the democratic aspirations of progressive postrnoderns such as Vattimo, or of constructive nihilists such as Gevork Hartoonian.¹⁷ At Seaside, the simulation of traditional places is a setting for the reenactment (and cynical marketing) of traditional relations. The difference, however, is that in this social setting everyone who can pay the price identifies with the Prince of Real Estate, not with the banished peasant. Postmodern place, as an embodied set of social relations, has edited space so as to exclude those unfamiliar Others.

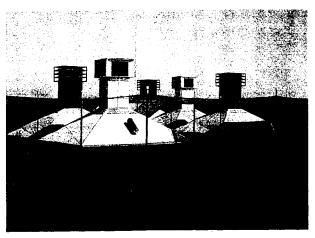
There is, of course, nothing new in the appropriation and distortion of history. The neo-traditionalism of today recalls the Colonial Revival of the Nineteenth Century. In that period, the mythification of the Anglo-Saxon origins of American culture was conjured up by the Captains of Industry to obscure the multi-cultural reality of rapid industrialization. Then, as now, the reinvention of traditional (aesthetic) types was intended to mask the instrumental means upon which the economy depended. The anglophile, gated communities of Houston or LA would, of course, beunmanageable without the Hispanic and African-American workers that maintain them. As Tzonis and Lefaivre have recognized, regions defined by the Book (by vernacular patterns and the canons of classicism), rather than by the experience of place, serve the interests of the elite authors of those books. ¹⁸

In the end, Seaside is only anti-modem because it accepts the modernist reification of moral codes, yet intends to reverse the teleology of modernist history.

What, then, is so different about Blueprint Demonstration Farm at Laredo, Texas? This project was jointly developed by the Center for Maximum Potential Building Systems of Austin, the Texas Department of Agriculture, Laredo Junior College and the Texas-Israel Exchange as an experiment in sustainable agricultural and architectural technology for semi-arid ecosystems. In stark contrast to the success that Seaside has enjoyed, Blueprint Farm looks today more like an archeological ruin than a demonstration of a viable, sustainable future. In fact, the Farm is an ironic diagram for the future of food production in the Southwest. It has been abandoned by the very institutions that were responsible for its production.

Because of the limited scope of this paper, I will not attempt to tell the tragic story of Blueprint Farm. I will, however, place the intentions of the Farm within the modernist dualism that opposes the local and the universal. In the comparison of these two projects, I am not arguing (as some have) that there is some essential connection between farms and suburbs. Rather, what I find instructive in this brief analysis is the conflicting attitudes toward making places that are held by the producers of these two projects. The projects are helpful because they reveal attitudes, not objects of similar kind.

For Pliny Fisk III, the principal designer of Blueprint Farm, regions (or places) are not territories that refer to a



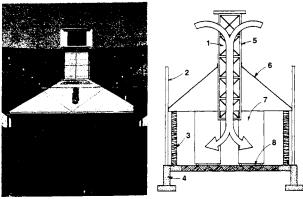


Figure 4: Blueprint Demonstration Farm; Laredo, Texas. Source: Architecture (May 1991), 70. Although Blueprint Farm is conceived in the terms of local ecological systems, it is spatially and formally far closer to Hilberseimer's universal space than to local patterns of place-making.

hierarchy of social relations. Rather, regions refer to a set of ecological and work relations that are constructed over time between humans and nonhumans. Ecologically similar spaces, or biomes, may be repeated around the world. Biogeograpers have mapped fourteen such classifications and hundreds of subclassifications. Work relations, however, are historical and culturally unique. Work relations between humans and nonhumans are as varied as the infinity of places. The intentions of Blueprint Farm, and of Critical Regionalism in general, are to produce sustainable relations between humans and nonhumans. Such relations originate in the peculiarity of places and develop through critical acts which intervene positively in ecological conditions and the distribution of power.

The "place-forms" employed at Blueprint Farm do not refer to distant cultural memories (as is the case at Seaside), but rather, embody a critical redescription of ecological and work relations present at the site.²⁰ Tzonis and Lefaivre have referred to this operation as "defamiliarization." Rather than soothe the anxieties of users through the simulation of the familiar, Critical Regionalism demands of the user a thoughtful examination of the conditions in which she finds herself. Yi-Fu Tuan has argued that when space becomes inhabited by "familiar landmarks and paths," it has become place.²¹ Tzonis and Lefaivre would have the equation work the other way as well. When place is emptied of icons and sacred trails, the emergent space must be re-experienced in order to be known. Or, as Frampton has put it; it is the difference between representation and re-presentation--again making a present of local conditions.22

With regard to the issue of territoriality and history, "Critical Regionalism does not support the emancipation of a single regional group nor does it set one group against another."23 In the case at Blueprint Farm, culturally alien groups are positively related to each other through networks of local technologies appropriated from similar biomes. In response to the extreme cooling requirements of Laredo, Blueprint Farm has appropriated at least three premodern technologies from ecologically similar conditions. In the first example, the wind-tower, or "bod-gir" appropriated from Iran, relies upon evaporative cooling and nocturnal long-wave radiation to reduce the cooling load. In the second example, the shading system, or "ramada" appropriated from native American architecture, produces shade and ventilates by strategically locating hot and cool air masses. In the third example, a wall system constructed of hay bales, appropriated from Europe, provides a high insulation rate by recycling locally produced waste materials. In all, seventeen such appropriated technologies are employed at Blueprint Farm. In each case they are "defamiliarized from the work relations that initially produced them. Such cross-cultural appropriation serves to remind distant peoples of their common material condition, not of their cultural uniqueness or of their domination over spaces occupied by others.

I am not arguing that the place-forms of Blueprint Farm are purely functional (in the modernist sense) and thus non-

representational. I am arguing that these forms emerge, not from the reification of moral codes, but from experienced ecological condition and tectonic traditions. If the placeforms of Blueprint Farm embody cultural values, as they must, they do so in a polyglot language which recognizes the equality of competing moral codes. Place, in this sense, operates to include others rather than to exclude. By appropriating, and defamiliarizing, the *tectonic operation* of local place-forms, the producers of Blueprint Farm have demanded that locals re-invent the *communicative operation* of place-forms. In contrast, the producers of Seaside appropriated *only* the communicative operation of local place-

My point here is that the producers of Blueprint Farm have rejected the modernist conflation of "place" and "community" that has so annoyed Agnew. And with regard to history, again unlike the neo-traditionalists, the producers of Blueprint Farm do not wish to reject the Enlightenment project. For Fisk and his collaborators, regions should not be lived as "coercive, limiting, or idiotic," but as critical places of resistance to the universalizing and consumptive tendencies of modern technology.²⁴

If—as DPZ and Robert Davis have done—one remains within the place/space duality constructed by modernist thought, the very notion of "critical places" is an oxymoron. One can only attempt to recoup lost grace and privilege. However, if—as Fisk and his collaborators have done—one understands architecture to be a setting for the dynamic production of relations between humans and nonhumans, then one can live critically and locally.

4.0 CONCLUSION

forms.

To reject the project of liberation because of the unintended consequences of grand schemes is, more often than not, the mask of those postmoderns who wish to obscure their antimodem sentiments. What might be more helpful than the reactionary inversion of modem dualisms is a renovation of modern excess that would lead to a critical synthesis of the local and the liberative, or of place and space. Such projects would draw their energy from the local and the particular, yet recognize the potential for fused horizons between peoples. I believe that this was precisely the intention (if not the ironic reality) of Blueprint Farm.

This brief comparative case study suggests that if we are to avoid the merely anti-modern in the positive construction of places, it may be necessary to abandon modem categories. Because Critical Regionalism transcends a central dichotomy of modernist thought, a radical proposal would be to identify Critical Regionalism as a nonmodern concept. The figure below may help to map this possibility in the field of architectural theory.

In this construction, the radical nihilism initiated by Neitchze and recently extended by Gianni Vattimo and Gevork Hartoonian is a negative synthesis of the modern dichotomy between space and place, just as Critical Region-

	Place (+)	Place (-)
Space (+)	Critical Regionalism	Modernism
Space (-)	Postmodernism	Radical nihilism

Figure 5: The field of architectural theory with regard to the concepts space and place.

alism is a positive synthesis. Both positions—Critical Regionalism and Radical Nihilism—offer ways out of the conflicted position constructed by modernist thought. An analysis of these positions, in the nonmodern terms of Bruno Latour, is, of course, another project.

NOTES

- ¹ The critics Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford are the obvious exceptions to this claim. Their critique of urban abstraction was, according to many, the origins of postmodern thought in architecture. The "heimatsarchitectur" of Nazi Germany is the most obvious example of the "Volkish" sentiments of architecture in the 1930's. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre have described the Nazi Heimat as supporting "... a neo-tribal militarized regimentation of society based on a fictitious 'taxa' excluding those outside and those inside who do not fit the strictest criteria of a delirious taxonomy." See, "Critical Regionalism, in Critical Regionalism: The Pamona Meeting Proceedings, Spyros Amourgis, ed., by the College of Environmental Design, California State Polytechnic University, Pamona (CA: 1991), 13. Michael Hays, in "Tessenow's Architecture as National Allegory: Critique of Capitalism or Protofascism,' Assemblage 8 (February 1989): 105-23, has made similar claims regarding the Weimar era proposals of Heinrich Tessanow. Hays argues that the community oriented schemes of Tessanow are "protofascist" at the level of form.
- Although, in this essay, I use the terms almost interchangeably, place, local and region, or space, universal, and international mean different things. A longer treatment of this subject would require that I define these terms more carefully. By grouping these terms into dialectic sets, I intend to distinguish the experiential familiarity of the first from the abstract unfamiliarity of the second.
- The term "nonmodern" was, to the best of my knowledge, first used by Bruno Latour in his essay, We Have Never Been Modern (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). The implications, for architecture, of Latour's critique of modernism and postmodernism alike is profound.
- ⁴ Tzonis and Lefaivre (1991), 4.
- See John Agnew, *Place and Politics* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 62. Agnew also discusses the theme of the historic devaluation of place in "Representing Space: Space, Scale and Culture in Social Science," in *Place / Culture / Representation*, Lames Duncan and David Ley, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- ⁶ Agnew (1987), 231.
- ⁷ See Edward Soja, Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory. (London: Verso, 1989), 120.
- Anna Bramwell, for example, has argued that German anti-Semitism arises from the doctrines of environmental determinism. To generalize that all Germans share a genius that originates in the forest and that wandering Jews share a rootlessness that originates in the desert is a classic example of determinist reductive logic. See, Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walter Darre and Hitler's "Green Party"*

- (Abbotsbrook: Kensal House, 1985. See also, Jeffery Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- ⁹ See, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 273.
- ¹⁰ See R.J.Johnston, A Question of Place (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 210.
- ¹¹ See Le Corbusier, "Guiding Principles of Town Planning," in Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture, Ulrich Conrads, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 91.
- ¹² Tzonis and Lefaivre (1991), 8.
- ¹³ See Kurt Anderson, "Is Seaside Too Good to be true," in *Seaside: Making a Town in America*, David Mohney and Keller Easterling, eds., (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), 42-47. Also see Steven Moore, "The Disappearing Suburb," in *Design Book Review 26* (Fall 1992), 9-11.
- ¹⁴ Susan Stewart, with reference to Jacques Derrida, has eloquently defined nostalgia as "the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity." The longing of neotraditionalists for unique and authentic identity is realized in their well intended, yet misguided, attempt to recoup the presumed grace of lost social structures. See, Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 24.
- Although some will assume that this Royal reference is to Prince Charles, see instead, Joel Barna, *The See-through Years* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992). The developer "Prince" that Barna describes so well in his history of Texas development in the 1980's is embodied by Robert Davis, the tasteful developer of Seaside.
- ¹⁶ Mohney and Easterling (1991), 71.
- ¹⁷ See, Vattimo, Gianni. The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, and Gevork Hartoonian, Ontology of Construction: On Nihilism of Technology in Theories

- of Modern Architecture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. In the tradition of Neitzsche, Vattimo and Hartoonian have proposed to secularize Modernism in a debunking operation similar to that by which modernism secularized Christianity. The radical nihilism of this proposal is strangely more constructive, and certainly more internally coherent, than the reactionary proposals of Neotraditionalism.
- See Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, "The Grid and the Pathway," in Architecture in Greece (1981).
- ¹⁹ See Pliny Fisk III, "Developing a Design Methodology for Sustainable Systems, Sustainable Design: A Planetary Approach. Proceedings of Exploration '92, The American Institute of Architects National Convention and Design Exposition, Boston, MA: June 19-22, 1992.
- The term "place-form" has been best defined by Kenneth Frampton to mean that "the architect must recognize the physical boundary of his work as a kind of temporal limit--the point at which the present act of building stops." For Frampton, the question of the "boundary" of the site is rooted in Heideggarian ontology. See, Kenneth Frampton, "Critical Regionalism" Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity," in *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 327.
- ²¹ See Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 71.
- ²² See Kenneth Frampton, "Rappel a l'Ordre," in *Constancy and Change in Architecture* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 73.
- ²³ Tzonis and Lefaivre (1991), 20.
- ²⁴ See Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 24. Fisk's attitudes toward technology are best described in *Bioregions & Biotechnologies: A New Planning Tool for Stable State Economic Development*. Tempe, Arizona: New Perspectives on Planning in the West, Arizona State University, May 1983.