Slow Architecture? - The Myth of Local Resistance to Globalization in Architecture: A Critique.

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(POST)CRITICAL ARCHITECTURE

Over the last decade the definition of architecture (and especially theory of architecture) as a "critical practice" has been challenged by a "post-critical" or "projective" stance, expressing pragmatist concerns against the futility of "critical" architecture respectively theory. These have played a major role in architectural debates in the past three decades: under the banner of "Criticality", the theory of architecture was recognized and professionalized as a regular academic discipline, with its own programs and chairs, with distinct "critical" magazines and publications, exhibitions and symposia, what lead to the effect that "Criticality" became synonymous with the theory of architecture.

The "critical" aspect stems from the original linguistic, psychoanalytical and neo-Marxist contexts of these theories, that, in different ways, follow the traditions of progressive thought since the Enlightenment: as a clash between the established, dominant *status quo* of culture and society and divergent possibilities, deviant latencies, the excluded *Other*, as a search for revelation, alternatives and changes. The question facing "critical architecture", however, is: "critical – of what?"[1] Strictly speaking, there are at least three divergent approaches within architecture that call itself "critical": first, the idea of the autonomy of the discipline with regard to external factors such as society, function or historical significance, and a reduction to the formal manipulation of the internal elements of architecture. This "criticism" is based on a linguistically post-structuralist model that interprets architectural elements as self-referential signs whose differentiation commences an internal process between figuration and abstraction.[2] The "criticism" consists in a methodical-critical analysis of architectural structure of meaning.

A second version of "critical architecture" rests in the opposition to monopolization, objectification and fetishization of architectural objects as a commodity, and in the search for strategies designed to evade the pressure of visual commodification of the "late capitalist" culture industry.[3] The strategies of this cultural and social criticism by architecture comprise a deceleration of perception, a "silence of architecture", a refusal of pictoriality, staging and branding, or the uncovering of architecture's staging devices, respectively, the demonstrative exhibition of negative social effects such as objectification, alienation or cliché. The "critical" content unfolds as self-reflective questioning of the architectural devices still available under the dominant forces of privatization, economization and globalization. Both these strands of "critical architecture" share the constant indexing of their "critical" state, their "critical" intentions, and the generative processuality of form by means of a complex system of references from the object to theory and vice versa.

The third approach to "critical architecture" seems as far from post-structural linguistics as from aesthetic strategies of abstraction and negation. In the early 1980 the theorists Kenneth Frampton, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre[4] suggested a "critical regionalism" in architecture as means to reject dominant consumer culture of post-modernism and to resist the mobilizing and equalizing forces

of global capitalism. Suspicious against the elitist theories of the two other "critical" strategies as much as against the then popular semiotics and imagery in architecture, they hoped to halt the loss of differentiation, specificity and locality. With a detour to Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" of the work of art,[5] the authors suggested to slow down the process of visual commodification by applying local materials, techniques and typologies, by referring to context, history, season and the landscape, altogether features that have to be experienced on site rather than in images. In contrast to the earlier notion of regionalism or (postmodern) vernacular tendencies, here the "critical" denotes a reflexive understanding of local inspiration and the notion of place, and opens a dialectic between technological "civilization" and "(world) culture",[6] as for example in the work of Alvar Aalto, Jørn Utzon or Alvaro Siza.

"REGIONALISM" – A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

Whilst Frampton is less concerned with the evolution of the term "regionalism" beyond the modern movement, it remains to Tzonis and Lefaivre to review its evolution: although they go back to the treatises of Vitruvius and Alberti to find evidence for an awareness of site, local conditions and techniques, they situate the begin of a regionalist discourse in the 18th Century English "picturesque" movement. They read the English landscape garden as a natural, sensual, and regional alternative to the rationalism of the French formalist garden; more, they put its specificity of the site – the *genius loci* as it has been reintroduced into architectural discourse by Christian Norberg-Schulz[7] – in contrast to universal hegemony of geometry.[8] In addition they foster an anti-conformist and anti-absolutist *political* dimension of the English garden as manifestation of liberal bourgeois ideologies of freedom, nature, self-awareness and last, but not least, distinct Englishness. Tzonis and Lefaivre take up a second threat from Goethe[9] who described the Strasbourg Cathedral as expression of national native genius versus the universal civilization of classicism – represented by Marc Antoine Laugier – that lead via gothic revival to the so called "romantic regionalism" of the 19th Century in search of national identity in the (fictive) past. Therefore the concept of "regionalism" is connected to the national uprising of the Napoleonic wars as well as to the then new science of history, politics of identity and the idea of

the nation state. This strong nationalistic undertone in regionalism remains dominant during historic eclecticism of 19th Century up to the conservative preservation movement of the early 20th Century, which criticized the negative impact of industrial revolution, infrastructure and urban expansion on small towns, villages and the landscape. From here leads a direct line to "völkische" regionalism as critique of the international modernist avant-gardes of the 1920s to 40s. Of course, the protagonists of "critical regionalism" refrain from nationalist chauvinism, but prefer the emancipatory strand of the English Picturesque, the Arts & Crafts Movement of Ruskin and Morris, or the American critic Lewis Mumford, who questioned the imperial ideologies of both historicism and universal modernism – so called "International Style" after the MoMA exhibition respectively catalogue of 1932 by Henry Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson[10] – which he opposed with regional practices that grow out of individual perspectives and a specific social climate, such as Henry Hobson Richardson in New England in the 1870s and 80s or West Coast architects of the 1930s and 40s. And it is Mumford who decidedly argues for regionalism as a "humanist" alternative to the constraints of abstraction, mechanism and estrangement of modern bureaucratic civilization, and who envisions the (American) home as a return to an organic, natural state of community and architecture as a point of resistance to advertising, fashion, reification, urban sprawl or automobile transportation.

The spread and differentiation of the modernist canon in the 1950s and 60s, regional "schools" such as the Scandinavian, Greek, Italian, British or local adaptations to Post-colonial settings caused a new debate about "regionalist" tendencies within the modern movement, whereas the revision of the 1960s and 70s that re-addressed history, style, semiotics, urban fabric, image, media, irony, ornament, culture of the everyday and vernacular questioned this framework altogether. It is against this background of the modern-postmodern debate triggered by Charles Jencks' publication of *The language of Post-Modern Architecture* in 1977[11] that Frampton, Tzonis and Lefaivre position their proposal for a "critical regionalism" as a differentiation from populist, vernacular or historicist regionalism, but also from (rational) universalism of International Style or the behaviorist implications of post-war social theories in architecture.

NOTES ON THE CRITICALITY OF "CRITICAL REGIONALISM"

These authors therefore define "regionalism" not as a matter of fact, but as a social construct, as a cultural discourse, as a frame to picture an alternative to theories that claim universal validity. The adjective "critical" denotes a reflexive understanding of this instable condition and historic evolution of the term, that asks for comprehensible criteria and contextualization. Hence, Frampton, Tzonis and Lefaivre think "region" less in oppositional pairs of city versus rural, of new versus old, or of center versus periphery, nor in essential terms of "volk", but as a conscious dialectic of local and global, of universal and specific under the inevitable conditions of modernity. This implies the second meaning of "critical" referring to "critical theory" of Frankfurt School philosophy: "regionalism" wants to be less a description of the existing, but more a projection of possible alternative practices within the system, that provide spaces of resistance to dominant market forces to the user or inhabitant. And "regionalism" is aware of its decency – and dependency – from liberal rationalism, empiricism, individualism and sensualism of 18th Century bourgeois philosophy as much as Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. In this sense "regionalism" seems to be the complementary *Other* to international commercial exchange, colonialist imperialism, technological industrial expansion or ubiquitous bureaucratic juridification leading to modern capitalist mass society. In difference to reactionary sentimentalism and historicism the protagonists of "critical regionalism" believed in Habermas' notion of Modernity as an unfinished project of emancipation,[12] where the question remains, how to reconcile local specificity and regional diversity with the universal progress of reason,[13] or rather, how to play out that tension dialectically.

However, the themes addressed by "critical regionalism" – topography, specificity of the local context, response to urban fabric, sensitivity towards local materials, craft work, and local light[14] – refer to architectural design and urban planning only, but are discussed as symbols or analogies of social, economic, political and philosophic concepts. If we return to Frampton – a former member of Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies in New York that has been the hotbed of the other two strands of "criticality" – this becomes obvious: Frampton defines "critical regionalism" as answer to "universalization" and "scenography" of consumerist semiotic postmodernism, and significantly he introduces his seminal essay of 1983 with a passage from Paul Ricoeur's *History and Truth*,[15] who opposes "rooted culture" with "universal civilization". Though already Ricoeur uses throw-away goods, consumer media, advertising and propaganda as *examples* for the destructive effect of (Western) "universalization" to (post-colonial) native national cultures, it is Frampton who takes one for the other and replaces the question of cultural identity with architectural characteristics: here "International Style" equals rationalism, mechanization and universal laws as much as postmodernist iconography is identical with consumerist capitalism, mass media and instrumental manipulation. In short: design itself is credited with an ethical function.

Another notion of the "critical", the resistance to neo-liberal globalization, became more prominent in the latest revision of *Modern Architecture* from 2007, a book originally published in 1980, where Frampton argues for the reconstruction of "civic form" and "public appearance", in the sense of Hannah Arendt as an accessible sphere of direct encounter and interaction like the ancient Greek agora,[16] against depoliticized mediatization and commodification of contemporary (built) environment.[17] This elective affinity of "critical regionalism" to anti-globalization movement, to an environmental, multicultural and post-colonial agenda and to grassroots resistance to branding and consumption, as it is manifests in other spheres of society for example with "slow food" or "no logo",[18] can be traced in the work of Tzonis and Lefaivre as well,[19] though the blending of (Western) identity politics with the concern about (non-Western) economic exploitation and (world) sustainability remains problematic.

Regionalist as well as organicist tendencies are as much a product of rigorous modernization as they carry an anti-urban, anti-technological and anti-pluralistic undercurrent that sets an ideal oneness of community and culture against the experience of estrangement, fragmentation and loss in society and civilization, what makes them an ideological construct in need of a dialectical analysis as much as the enlightenment project they stem from.[20] Already Marx had hoped to overcome capitalist division of labor and estrangement with free,

self-fulfilling production, an anti-technological resentment that carried on from Morris' Arts & Crafts to expressionism, organicism and regionalism to contemporary consumer-producer models and environmentalism. Stripped from its cynicism, the counter attack of Rem Koolhaas' "Generic City" on the historicity of the (European) city and on authentic spatial experience has its merit in pointing out the liberating effect to think urbanity beyond duration, memory and place or utopist planning theories.[21] However, in contrast to earlier critics of the "reactionary" implications of essence, authenticity, and identity of regionalism, Koolhaas does not offer a critical project – such as the "politicization of art"[22] – any longer.

But let's return to Frampton's *Modern Architecture* once more: already in his first edition of 1980, before the publication of the articles on "critical regionalism", he closes his "critical history" (subtitle) that covers the area from Enlightenment to the then current tendencies of the 1970s, such as neo-avantgarde, neo-rationalism, structuralism and high-tech, with a chapter on "Place Production and Architecture: Towards a critical theory of building".[23] He introduces this concluding chapter with a quote from Martin Heidegger's essay "Building, Dwelling and Thinking" from 1951.[24] Heidegger defends the singularity of "place" (*Ort*) versus the omnipresent of "space" (*Raum*) and calls for an material authenticity of the architectural object as a cultural work (*Werk*) – represented by the historic stone masonry river bridge in Heidelberg or the traditional Black Forest homestead – instead of the notion of architecture as a technological artifact (*Gestell*). Even if Frampton frames this call for a return to the "worked" architectural object as "critical" and contrasts its building of a place with the dissolution into mega structures, flows of information, or mobile bubble environments, it is clear that this approach owes as much to phenomenology as to "critical theory", and has to be read in relation to Norberg-Schulz emphasis of place[25] and to Alberto Pérez-Gómez critique of scientist functionalism.[26] To Frampton as to many other theoreticians and architects, "critical theory" and phenomenology did not mean a contradiction, since the material immobility, the designed uniqueness and the multi-sensual experience of the architectural object seemed to question global streams of capital, images and people *per se*, and hence could be understood as a materialized local resistance.

However, today we witness the increased fetishization of architectural objects as icons, corporate logos and city marketing, not only of the "spectacular" buildings such as the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by Frank Gehry, the Jewish Museum Berlin by Daniel Libeskind or BMW World Munich by Coop Himmelb(l)au – all who belonged to the "critical" group of deconstructivist architects of the 1980s – but also the visual commodification of "materialist" and "worked" buildings from architects deriving out of "critical regionalism", such as Mario Botta, Tadao Ando, Peter Zumthor or Herzog & de Meuron. And though these architects respond in their buildings to Frampton's call for the "tactile and materialist rather than visual and graphic", and manifest his preference of multi-sensual experience of moving through atmospheric spaces, they all belong to the favorite circle of star architects being immersed in today's "economy of attention". The critical potential of "regionalist" building as resistance of "place" against commodification and globalization so much hoped for by Frampton, Tzonis and Lefaivre, have nowadays evaporated: left is just another signature design product available on the market.

SLOW ARCHITECTURE

Under the new paradigm of sustainability in architecture and urban planning the already widely debunked "critical regionalism" seems to enjoy a second life: parallel to the dawn of the other two strands of "critical architecture" – formalism and negation – through pragmatism, cynicism and post-criticality in the 2000s earlier theoretic concepts are on the rise again. Not for nothing we witness currently a wave of publications and exhibitions of post-modern architects, such as Venturi, Stirling, Ungers, Rossi or Moore. And this revision of the postmodern is paralleled, also at no surprise, by a new strand of phenomenological approaches to the built environment: a new sensuality of mood, affect, atmosphere, bodily involvement (though often modified through gender perspectives) and apperception of the actual object against the personal spatial memory of the observer have replaced much of the linguistic preformation of earlier readings. Especially the current interest in the non-material, physiological features of spatial installations – light, color, smell, temperature, climate, sound, etc. – are deeply informed by neo-phenomenological theories, such as Gernot Böhme's *Atmospheres* or Peter Sloterdijk's *Spheres* trilogy,[27]

as well as by the affirmative and transgressive thoughts of Gilles Deleuze. This does not mean that the critique against naïve "essentialism" and undifferentiated understanding of human subjectivity respectively identity formation of the last two decades evaporated. But body, flesh, emotion and life in its various forms –including its senses, deficiencies and support systems – has become a starting point for contemporary "aesthetics", which means literally nothing else than sensation and perception.

Sloterdijk turns the traditional philosophical question of "being" provokingly on its feet, and asks: being how and being where? Regarding the modern urban subject he parallels the biologic cell with the apartment as self-sufficient universes and immune system that offers the single inhabitant the comfort and control over any form of intervention from the outside. Inside the self-container he differentiates between a series of topoi (places or spheres) and their related ego-techniques of self-care: from the preparation of food, to cleaning, to sound and media, to eros and thanatos.[28] If historically the parallel between food and architecture stood for matters of taste, convention and etiquette, and was often used to make the claim, that architecture does not belong to the arts, but rather to culture,[29] with Sloterdijk there is a new twist: architecture and food are both practices of the self-care, forms of life-support and hence "explications" of modern being in the world.

This notion returns in a comment by the Swiss architect Valerio Olgiati who differentiates architecture according to food: Italian versus French, or, to relativize notions of nationality, the purity of a few ingredients which remain discernable in the preparation process, versus the processed blending and flavoring to complex compounds of "sensations".[30] With this excursus into cuisine Olgiati points to the difference of working through a few specific problems, such as material, construction, site and their interplay still as visible elements of their own right, versus a compositional strategy of merging and assembling various parts and layers into complex "flows". This does not imply the belief in function, clarity and order of rational modernism, but architecture as an exercise in precise thinking: framing a problem, choice of proper ingredients and their uncompromising explication into a built work. Like Zumthor, the architect Olgiati worked with

after his studies under the "analogous architecture" of Miroslav Sik, this notion of a regionalist practice does not carry any picture postcard images of the Alpine landscape, of romantic sublimity or happy rural past, but introduces post-industrial topics into an highly constructed and managed cultural landscape that is determined not only by tourism, but also by energy (hydropower), infrastructure, high-tech industries and even national defense. Placeness and locality in the work of Olgiati as much as Zumthor abstain from anti-modernism or self-referential autonomy of the crafted object, but demonstrate a contemporaneity that relates the remote architectural artifacts to the urban lifestyle that penetrates all fibers of our Western societies, and connects these islands of civilization in the Alps to Berlin, New York, Tokyo.[31]

If we witness today an acceleration of the design and building process with CAD libraries, BIM and modularization, where the assembly of prefabricated catalogue products replaced craft, a practice like Olgiati's or Zumthor's unfolds a critical stance: Zumthor's built Sankt Kolumba (1996–2007) with massive masonry brick walls avoiding layers and screens, thereby restoring the mass of the former Gothic church, nevertheless with contemporary sensibility. Already Zumthor's early church St. Benedict in Sumvitg, Grisons (1985-88), demonstrates this sensibility of a work combining local material and techniques with contemporary themes without being populist vernacular. The works of these architects aims explicitly at a socio-political project to maintain traditional craft skills, to generate local revenue and community participation in remote Alpine valleys of Grisons, therefore they are regional and sustainable in a cultural and social sense, not only in an "aesthetic" one.

ENDNOTES

1   Reinhold Martin, "Critical of What? Toward a Utopian Realism", *Harvard Design Magazine 22* (2005): 104–109.
2   Peter Eisenman, "Autonomy and the Will to the Critical", *Assemblage 41* (2000): 90–92.
3   K. Michael Hays, "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form", *Perspecta 21* (1984): 15–29.
4   See: Alexander Tzonis, Lian Lefaivre, "The Grid and the Pathway", *Architecture in Greece*, (N5 1981), reprint in: *Atelier 66. The Architecture of Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985) p. 14–25; Anthony Alofsin, Alexander Tzonis, Lian Lefaivre, "Die Frage des Regionalismus" in: Michael

Andritzky, Lucius Burckhardt, Ot Hoffmann (eds.) *Für eine andere Architektur* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1981) p. 121–134; Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism", *Perspecta 20* (1983): 147–162.

5   Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963) (shortened French translation originally published 1936 in: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5); in English: idem, *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World [1968]), p. 217–272.

6   Frampton (1983): 148.

7   Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture* (London; New York: Academy Editions; Rizzoli, 1980).

8   Tzonis and Lefaivre "The Grid and the Pathway" (1985): 14.

9   Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Von deutscher Baukunst*, [1772].

10   Alfred H. Barr, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson and Lewis Mumford, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, Feb. 10 to March 23, 1932* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932); cf. Henry Russell Hitchcock jr, Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, Inc. [1932]).

11   Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977)

12   Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Kleine politische Schriften I-IV* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981); idem, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: 12 Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); idem, *Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt. Philosophisch-politische Aufsätze 1977-1990* (Leipzig: Reclam 1991).

13   Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History* (Cambridge, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

14   Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism" (1983): 151.

15   Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilisation and National Cultures", in: *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1961), p. 276, 283 (original: *Histoire et Vérité*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959); see: Frampton "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism" (1983): 148; Frampton "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in: Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsen: Bay Press, 1983) p. 17.

16   Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1958), p. 198–199: "Action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."

17   Kenneth Frampton, "Chapter 7: Architecture in the Age of Globalization: topography, morphology, sustainability, materiality, habitat and civic form 1975-2007", in: *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*, 4th revised edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 344–389.

18   Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

19   Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Critical Regionalism. Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World* (Munich: Prestel, 2003)

20   Cf. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972)

21   Rem Koolhaas, "Generic City (1994)", in: Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 1246–1264.

22   Benjamin (1963): 44

23   Frampton, *Modern Architecture* (1980): 280–297.

24   Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken" in: *Mensch und Raum. Darmstädter Gespräch II*, Darmstadt: Neue Darmstädter Verlagsanstalt, 1952; reprint (1994) *Mensch und Raum. Das Darmstädter Gespräch 1951*, Braunschweig: Vieweg, p. 88–102; for English translation see: idem, *Basic writings: from Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977)

25   Cf. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci* (1980).

26   Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); original: *La génesis y superación del funcionalismo en arquitectura* (Mexico: Limusa, 1980).

27   Cf. Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Aesthetik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995); cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I-III: Blasen – Globen – Schäume*, 3 Volumes (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1998–2004)

28   Peter Sloterdijk, "Cell Block, Ego-Spheres, Self-Container – The Apartment as Co-Isolated Existence (extract from Spheres III)", *Log 10* (2007): 89–108.

29   Cf. Adolf Loos, "Architektur" in: *Trotzdem* (Vienna: Prachner, 1997), p. 101

30   Valerio Olgiati at his lecture at the Harvard GSD on 09/09/2009

31   Philip Ursprung, "Limits to Representation: Peter Zumthor and Hans Danuser", *Visual Resources*, 27:2 (2011): 172–184.