Radical Regionalism: An Aesthetic Future for Rural America

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PROBLEMS OR INDIFFERENCE?

In *Log* 39, Michael Meredith argues that over the past decade the discipline of architecture has focused on two competing models for production: architecture which expresses problem-solving and architecture which expresses an aesthetic of indifference.[1] This paper proposes an aesthetic future for rural America through a reframing of the ideas of Regionalism which have been discussed in the discipline for several generations.

While Meredith's dichotomy might seem to some as a false choice, I think it is useful to frame the way we have previously understood the architect's role in rural and suburban America. In contemporary practice and particularly in architectural education today, sites which fall between small towns and rural landscapes are often characterized by their problems: suburban sprawl, poverty, inequality, and lack of economic or educational opportunities. Thus, architects have either ignored these spaces and instead focused on extreme urbanization, or architects have often acted as performative problem solvers using architecture to express aesthetic ideas specifically related to the problem itself.

Problematizing rural architecture has been easy. Theorizing rural architecture has been harder. Beyond Kenneth Frampton's reading of regionalism, is there another way to analyze rural architecture, mine it for new aesthetic aspirations, and propose radical alternatives? First, it is important to define the way the discipline has recently discussed issues of regionalism. Although the term Critical Regionalism was originally developed by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre,[2] the term was later defined by Kenneth Frampton through his many seminal texts. According to Frampton, the Critical Regionalist movement arose as an alternative to both the heroic period of modernism and the protagonists of post-modernism. Frampton argues that a true Critical Regional project must first " 'deconstruct' the overall spectrum of the world culture which it inevitably inherits," and second, "has to achieve, through synthetic contradiction, a manifest critique of universal civilization."[3]

Equally important to consider is a lesser-known alternative definition given by Lewis Mumford in a series of lectures at Alabama College in 1941 entitled "The South in Architecture."[4]

Over the four lectures, Mumford puts forth an interpretation of regionalism which combines what he calls the "current conditions of culture" with an understanding of the universal. In Mumford's lecture he explains: "People often talk about regional characters as if they were the same things as aboriginal characters: the regional is identified with the rough, the primitive, the purely local. That is a serious mistake. Since the adaptation of a culture to a particular environment is a long, complicated process, a full-blown regional character is the last to emerge."[5] As an example Mumford refers to wine culture in which the grape which produces the best wine is not always indigenous to the spot where it is grown. According to Mumford, a regional culture is not a fact upon which we stumble; it is an ongoing struggle to construct a cultural product, one which take generations. He writes:

> "We are only beginning to know enough about ourselves and about our environment to create a regional architecture. Regionalism is not a matter of using the most available local material, or of copying some simple form of construction that our ancestors used, for want of anything better, a century or two ago. Regional forms are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which most fully succeed in making a people feel at home in their environment: they do not merely utilize the soil but they reflect the current conditions of culture in the region."[6]

Mumford believed it was necessary to adopt the most modern ideas and technologies or "assimilate" these aspects of the universal into the regional in order to create a world which can be understood, interpreted, and humanized. As an example, Mumford expounds on Thomas Jefferson's designs of Monticello and the University of Virginia. Mumford argues that Jefferson used the idea of a universal architecture through the "international style"

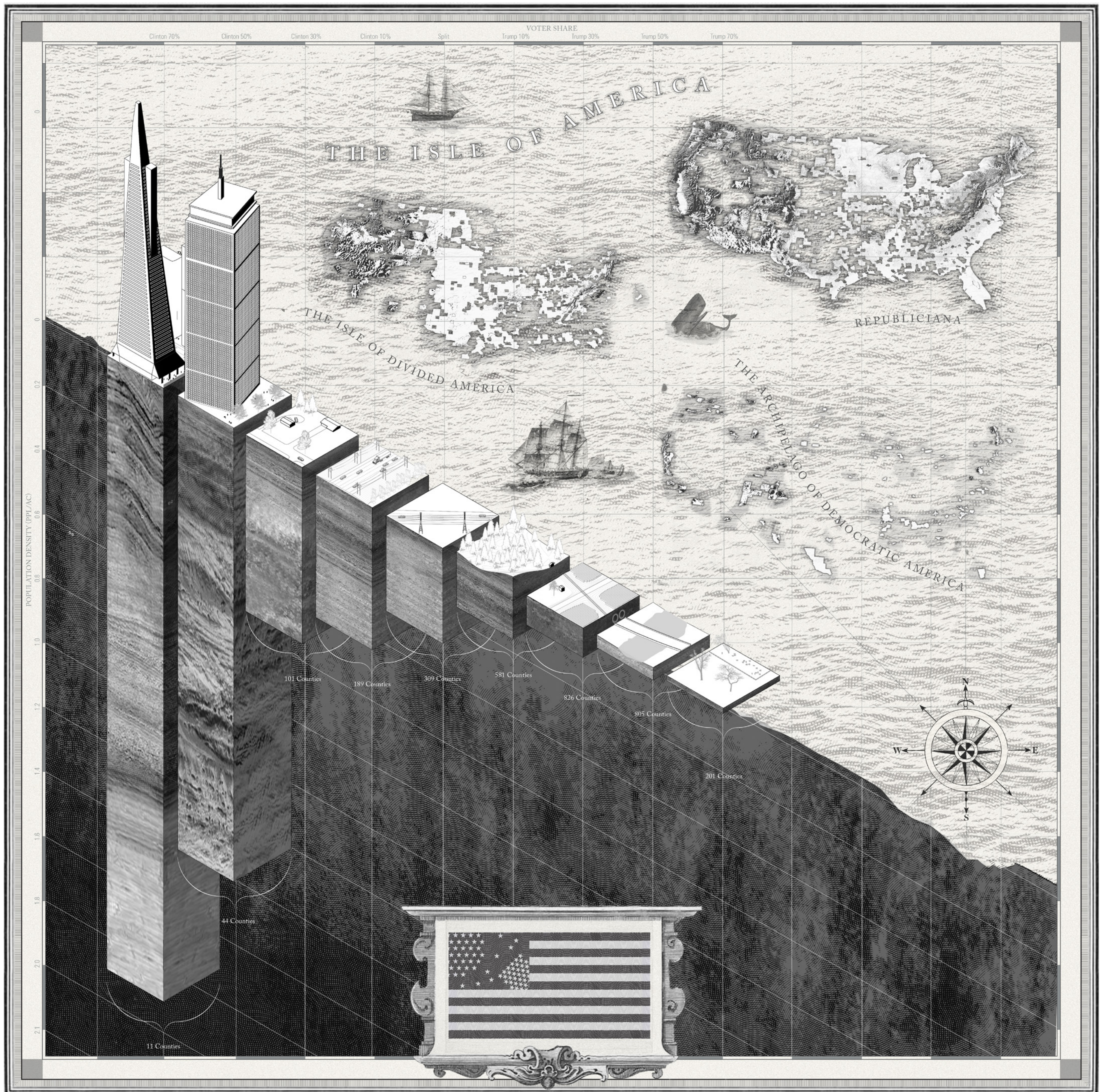

Figure 1. *The Isle of America*, The Open Workshop / Neeraj Bhatia, 2017.

of the eighteenth-century—the architectural language of classicism. Mumford equally advocated that a universal architecture should incorporate the latest technology. His defining criticism of Jefferson's work was that Jefferson had not fully incorporated the universal language of the machine and that he had continued to accept the idea that mechanization was "unbeautiful."[7]

Building upon Mumford's definition of regionalism, I propose a more radical form of regionalism, one which allows aesthetics to inform and act in lieu of a problem solving mentality. To do this, I believe we must remove the link between regionalism and geography.

As recent as 2016, Kenneth Frampton admitted that the he was inspired by the idea of critical regionalism specifically in contrast to the "universal suburbia in the States, where despite the vast continental expanse, the same suburbia was everywhere."[8]

But now, it is clear (at least to some) that Frampton's argument no longer reflects our contemporary condition. In fact, suburbia is far

Figure 2. Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Ohio, USA. Photo by author, 2017.

too large to define and contains a multitude of architectural typologies and regions within it. Suburban sprawl has not created spaces which are the same everywhere; it has created multiple new types of environments we have not yet defined. Architects are not yet fluent in the architectural language of a Wal-Mart, an Amazon fulfillment center, or even a gated residential community.

One of the defining characteristics of suburbia is it's seeming lack of definition. Suburbia, exurbia, and subrural America is now, more than ever, a soupy mix of densities, vernacular and generic types, big box stores and developer homes. In truth, this muddy territory has extremely clear boundaries; however, they do not conform to our traditional modes of architectural analysis. To make sense of the mess, we might be better served by looking to other disciplines in order to organize our intangible landscape.

BEYOND GEOGRAPHY

Today, the "region" in America is no longer geographical; it is political. The Region is a series of socioeconomic definitions with spatial, formal and aesthetic consequences. After the 2016 US presidential election, the Open Workshop made a series of drawings showing the environmental conditions of different categories of voters mapped through density (fig. 04). However, density is only one spatial signifier of our polarized landscape, and what is more difficult to categorize are the aesthetic criteria which accompany each group. To define these regions we might consider additional parameters including: the availability of broadband service, the number of college degree holders, the types of big-box chain stores, or the percentage of military families.

Several recent publications have illuminated the need to shift the study of groups (or in architecture, types) from geography to identity. As early as 2004, Bill Bishop began writing about what he termed "The Big Sort" which described a dramatic shift in the living patterns of Americans since 1965.[9] Since that time, the nation has sorted in ways which are more about being with like-minded individuals than any other demographic feature. Churches, schools, and neighborhoods have grown more politically homogeneous; young people and those with a college degree have clustered not just in urban environments, but in particular cities. In almost every way possible, people have self-selected their neighbors and have done it through an aesthetic performance. This sort has not happened because people first research the politics of a new neighborhood before they move. Instead, Bishop has suggested that there is "a look" to communities which draws in like-minded members. As architects, we can assert that this "look" is an aesthetic choice. According to Bishop, it is not religion, or race, but how we live and what we think that becomes the defining feature of regions. As the built environment encompasses a large part of a community's "look" or aesthetic performance, architects should not overlook their power in the political realm.

In *Our Patchwork Nation*, author Dante Chinni breaks down every county in the US into twelve community types with names like Campus and Careers, Boom Towns, Military Bastions, Monied Burbs, and Tractor Country.[10] Using this standard he argues that Ann Arbor, MI is more similar to Akron, OH, Knoxville, TN, or Sonoma, CA than to any of Michigan's neighboring towns. This phenomenon has gone so far that there are now entire books devoted to explaining one "region" to another as in the 2016 best-seller, *Strangers in their Own Land* where sociologist Arlie Hochschild travelled from her self-proclaimed Berkley "bubble" to Louisiana in order to understand the people who identified as the Tea Party and would ultimately vote for Donald Trump in 2016.[11]

Since 2012, political reporter David Wasserman has been tracking Presidential polling data in relationship to counties with either a Whole Foods or a Cracker Barrel.[12] What he noticed is not only the possibly obvious outcome that counties with a Whole Foods are more likely to vote Democratic and counties with a Cracker Barrel are more likely to vote Republican; the important discovery is that this divide has increased steadily with every single election since the early 1990s.

If you have spent any time in either a Whole Foods or a Cracker Barrel (fig. 02), you will also know that their "local" or "homegrown" values are expressed aesthetically. The leap to politics in this argument may not be as abrupt as it seems. Both Mumford and Meredith allude to specific political events of the day in their texts. Mumford spends considerable time in his 1941 lecture debating whether it was even appropriate for him to be lecturing on architecture when he could be using his time advocating for America to join WWII. While Meredith's argument is less directly political, he hinges the discussion of aesthetics on political events, positing an aesthetic of indifference as a consequence of a political climate. In his conclusion

Figure 3. *Ghostbox* by T+E+A+M, 2017

he writes, “at its best, architecture, like art, operates politically through aesthetics, not direct engagement.”[13]

WHY REGIONS?

Redefining the “region” is important because it will change the way we think about, work in, and learn from our contemporary condition. It might lead us to consider parking lots as one of America’s largest spatial products, and our designs might capitalize on ‘parking-lot regionalism’ or embrace ‘big-box aesthetics’ as a cultural context. It is precisely because we can redraw regions in this way which makes the case for a radical aesthetic. Perhaps, aesthetics driven by local climate or building traditions are less relevant today, and instead, aesthetics can provide avenues for architects to engage in political and economic issues in a rapidly changing environment.

One contemporary theory of regional thinking has been explored by Keller Easterling in her project Extrastatecraft.[14] Although it is applied at the global level, Easterling’s argument is actually one based on the similarity and distinctness of extrastate zones as defined by political and economic factors with specific aesthetic and spatial protocols, i.e. regions. Her work reads the entire world as a series of zones less defined by their geographical location than their connection to particular global industries or extrastate status. This reading has created a new understanding of architectural typologies as ‘spatial protocols’ rather than reoccuring cultural practices.

We are now teaching the first generation of students who truly came of age in parking lots and big-box stores, cul-de-sacs and empty lots; a childhood where the indoor shopping mall might have been their first experience of unsupervised exploration of architecture.[15] Big-box stores and cul-de-sacs are as regionally specific to the American landscape as the woods and lakes of Finland, or the qualities of sunlight in Spain. By ignoring these American particularities, we may inadvertently produce students who believe that the only true architecture exists in cultures with extreme climates or in remote places.

While this approach is still radical, it is not new, of course. It has been nearly fifty years since Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi took their students to learn from Las Vegas, but as Mumford suggested, “it is only now that we are beginning to know enough about ourselves and about our environment to create a regional architecture.”[16] If Venturi and Scott Brown began that exploration fifty years ago, we owe it to our current students to critically engage in the world as they experience it, as it exists.[17]

WHAT NOW?

It is less clear what a radical regional form of practice might look like, but there are a few works which use suburban aesthetics radically. Several contemporary practices are attempting to find new formal combinations which harness the potential of the banal, the repeated, the generic—characteristics of a new regional form (fig. 03, 04, 05). These works only hint at the possibilities of this aesthetic practice; the full impact is yet to be discovered.

In conclusion, rural landscapes might be the best breeding ground for experimental aesthetics. Rural America has always maintained a spirit of ad-hocism, fixer-uppers, and do-it-yourself attitudes. Somewhere between the juxtaposition of big-box stores (Home Depot or Wal-Mart) and the rural vernacular typologies (shotgun houses or cantilever barns) there is a radial aesthetic project. Suspending for a moment the “problems” of the region we may be able to work within the realm of aesthetics to uncover, with distinct sincerity, a deeper understanding of the radical region.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael Meredith, “Indifference, Again,” *Log* 39, (Winter 2017):75-79.
2. The term Critical Regionalism was first used in 1981 by Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis. See Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, “The Grid and the Pathway,” in *Architecture in Greece*, (1981): 164-78.
3. Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic,* ed. Hal Foster (Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 21. See also Kenneth Frampton, “Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic,” in *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, ed. Vincent B. Canizaro (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 375-385.
4. Lewis Mumford, *The South in Architecture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941).
5. Ibid, 29.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, 54-55.
8. Kenneth Frampton, “On the Grounds of Modern Architecture,” interview by Thomas McQuillan, published August 30, 2016, transcript, http://architecturenorway.no/stories/people-stories/mcquillan-frampton-16.
9. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).
10. Dante Chinni and James Gimpel Ph.D, *Our Patchwork Nation: The Surprising Truth About the “Real” America* (Penguin, 2011).
11. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the America Right* (The New Press: 2016).

Figure 4. Image from *Atlas of Another America* by Keith Krumwiede, 2017

Figure 5. *Safety Not Guaranteed* by Ashley Bigham, Outpost Office, 2015

12. David Wasserman, "Senate Control Could Come Down To Whole Foods vs. Cracker Barrel," *FiveThirtyEight* October 8, 2014, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/senate-control-could-come-down-to-whole-foods-vs-cracker-barrel. See also Emily Chertoff, "Cracker Barrel's Oddly Authentic Version of American History" *The Atlantic*, March 02, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/03/cracker-barrels-oddly-authentic-version-of-american-history/272826.
13. Meredith, 79.
14. Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (Verso, 2016).
15. For a moving portrait of this generation's suburban experience, see Arcade Fire's 2010 release of the album "The Suburbs" and the accompanying music video of the same title directed by Spike Jonze.
16. Mumford, 29.
17. See Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).