



# Critical Regionalism for our time

Kenneth Frampton coined the phrase Critical Regionalism to define the elements of topography, climate, light and tectonics fundamental to the art of building - these are equally valid today, write *Véronique Patteuw* and *Léa-Catherine Szacka*

**(Opposite) in *Architecture without Architects* (1964), Bernard Rudofsky explores communal architecture: primitive manmade structures honed from centuries of experience exemplifying vernacular richness and respect for the land. Three covers of *Architectural Design* during Kenneth Frampton's tenure as technical editor address his concern for the local in an increasingly global context (below, anti-clockwise from top): Switzerland (September 1962); UK issue (November 1962); Recent Work of Mies van der Rohe in the US (January 1964)**



There are many reasons for diving into old archives, dusty closets and faded smelly books. But what could it mean to reactivate a text which, it seems, never really died in the first place? In the age of Greta Thunberg and digital activism, a rising interest in 'degrowth' and a taste for cultivating the slow and the local are invading all spheres of Western culture. Architects are no exception and several practices currently position themselves in response to the age of transition that is ours. This is not without recalling the plea of the Anglo-American critic and historian Kenneth Frampton who published 'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance' in *Perspecta* in 1983, a text that defended an alternative to the threat of universalisation he witnessed at that time.

Frampton's call to counter universalisation with specific architecture took form in his essay, which elaborates on several more philosophical points, before making a case for the topographic, climatological conditions of a site, the tectonics of architectural construction, and the tactile sensibility of architecture. For him, it was within the specific conditions of a local context that an alternative approach could develop: an approach in which the tactile would surpass the visual, the tectonic would win over the scenographic, and the hybrid would be favoured over the homogeneous. The work of architects such as Álvaro Siza or Jørn Utzon was, according to Frampton, anchored in the local conditions of their sites. It was by resisting both the reductive Functionalism of Late Modern architecture and the superficial aesthetics of the newly acclaimed Postmodern architecture, that these architects and others elaborated on an architectural approach inspired by the conditions in which their practice was rooted. Frampton argued that within these projects a certain form of resistance seemed to develop at the precise moment that culture became a global concept. In other words, in the early 1980s Frampton defended 'critical regionalism', an architectural position that, within globalising trends, strove for a form of cultural, economic and political independence.

But Frampton's search for a third way also needs to be understood in a different light. Within a context then dominated by the powerful winds of Postmodernism, Frampton aimed to give attention to architects who had been relegated to the periphery of a system centred on star figures working in specific areas of Europe. The topographical conditions of peripheral European regions enabled him to explore practices with alternative stances towards Postmodernism. Since the early 1960s Frampton's interest had gone beyond the borders of the old continent. As technical editor of *Architectural Design* (between 1962 and 1965), Frampton had the ambition of pursuing an 'encyclopaedic' editorial policy. That ambition would result in 31 issues of *AD* focusing on the development of modern architecture in peripheral situations, including extensive features on non-European territories such as Chile, Brazil and Mexico. Although England and the US were still covered comprehensively, under Frampton's direction, the geographical focus of the magazine shifted predominantly to continental Europe and Latin America, featuring extended articles on specific regions, architects and single buildings.

Frampton's attention to these peripheral conditions allowed him to explore local environments, vernacular elements and material cultures. In 'Prospects for a Critical Regionalism' and in subsequent reworked versions of *Modern Architecture*, the historian cites projects by the Argentinian Amancio Williams, the Italian-Argentine architect Clorindo Testa and the Venezuelan Carlos Raúl Villanueva, as well as the 'sensual and earthbound architecture' of Mexico's Luis Barragán, whose claim of architecture, landscape and gardening as one is the basis of the topographic dimension of Critical Regionalism - while for Frampton, Barragán remains committed to 'large, almost inscrutable abstract planes set in the landscape', his houses 'are nothing if not topographic'. Frampton advanced his interest in peripheral conditions in several edited publications and essays: 'It is my contention that Critical Regionalism continues to flourish sporadically within the cultural fissures that articulate in unexpected ways the continents of Europe and America. These borderline manifestations may be characterised, after Abraham Moles, as the "interstices of freedom".'

Critical Regionalism can be understood in different ways: as a compositional understanding of the ground figure of the project; as an interest in the cultural and material histories of a specific site; or as

an awareness of the technical constraints and opportunities that a site can imply. But, for Frampton, clearly not interested in sentimental architecture, Critical Regionalism also needs to be situated in an ideological perspective. His Marxist reaction to universalising capitalisation, and his refusal of Western architecture's hegemonic turn towards history, led him to develop a theoretical apparatus that would enable an architecture of resistance. As such, Critical Regionalism proposed a set of disciplinary categories that aimed at understanding architecture beyond aesthetic universalisation.

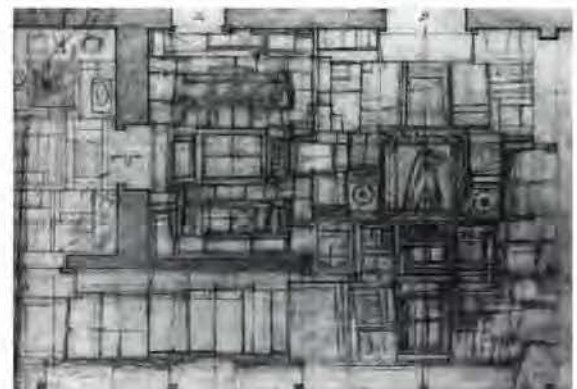
Frampton's text was first and foremost a call for an architecture of *arrière-garde*, an architecture not driven by the quest for newness and invention, but by a certain lateness, an alternative to the well-known role of the *avant-garde* architect as the 20th century had defined and cherished. Frampton's advocacy for buildings that would be sensitive to the existing conditions of the site, was intended as a political tool to counter the commodification of architecture into a global consumer product. But if he had originally set out his categories to target political repercussions, the text's critical fortune failed to keep these political objectives alive. Critical Regionalism became all too soon a historical document, understood as a poetic, acritical and apolitical interest in peripheral conditions.

It is our conviction that the text represents today much more than a historical artefact. While the work of Postmodern architects such as Aldo Rossi and Robert Venturi is rediscovered by younger generations, Frampton's text and the projects mentioned in his *Perspecta* article offer new perspectives on the heritage of Postmodern architecture. His 'critique from within', arguing against ideas of sign, symbol or irony, brings about notions of authenticity, tactility, materiality and tectonics that are most valuable in light of the ecological, economical and political challenges the architectural profession is facing today. But beyond that, Frampton's text has a compelling character: it frames new forms of practices and new imperatives linked to place and context. While architects are faced with requirements of density to preserve open space for nature and agriculture, a certain sensibility to the qualities of the ground in which projects are embedded is imperative to rethink the concept of ground occupation. And while the current state of ecological transition confronts the profession with short cycles and economies of means, local materials, building knowledge and craftsmanship become more and more appealing if not necessary. As such, the text provides a framework for younger architectural practices aspiring to a rearguard perspective and aiming at keeping 'a certain cultural ethic alive'.

The resonance and wide-ranging impact of Frampton's 1983 text on architectural culture is undeniable. Widely distributed, the text was reworked and republished in a number of journals. It was also integrated as a chapter into the second edition of Frampton's *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. And while the text was recently reactivated by historians as a perspective that offers a more precise understanding of some of the concerns and challenges that drove architectural culture in the last two decades of the 20th century, several architects today still find the concept of Critical Regionalism relevant for their practice.

Indeed, Frampton's informal, grounded architecture and tectonics has become a driving force for a number of contemporary architects. And as European norms strongly influence local building practices, in Europe Critical Regionalism helps to re-establish the link between facade and construction, between energy norms and tectonics, between embeddedness and contemporaneity. The concept contributes as such to the exploration of the close relationships between the building, its construction and its meaning. The Ghent-based Belgian firm Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu testifies to this approach with their project Caritas (AR September 2018). Their intervention is minimal but essential. On the campus of the psychiatric hospital, they save a building that had lost its meaning by not only proposing an alternative programme, but carefully keeping the ruin intact. The intervention, essential in preventing the building from collapsing, becomes fully expressed through the lens of tectonics emphasised through their atypical colours. Caritas proposes a contemporary language embedded within an architecture of slowness: the architects have a long-term contract as 'gardeners of the building' for years to come.

**In Dimitris Pikionis's landscaping of the routes winding up to the Acropolis in Athens in the 1950s (right), including the renovation of the Saint Demetrios Loumbardiaris church (below), stones salvaged from local buildings were laid in a seemingly haphazard yet carefully considered arrangement. The cobbles and shards of marble jostle around existing walls and trees, meandering across the landscape**





One can also understand the compelling character of 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' by looking at different contemporary critical readings of the text. Frampton's call for a location-specific architecture was not averse to rejecting or ignoring Postmodernism's taste for ambiguity, irony, signs and symbols. Several contemporary architectural practices position themselves deliberately towards the many faces of Postmodernism. The Dutch firm Monadnock, for instance, oscillates consciously between architectural autonomy and site-specificity. So while the work of Monadnock is indebted to Frampton's Critical Regionalism, it also criticises what Job Floris and Sandor Naus consider as some of the historian's omissions. Crossing Frampton's proposal with the fertility of Venturi's difficult whole, enables Monadnock to reinterpret the text and adapt it to present conditions. As Floris recently admitted, the practice is interested in 'the idea of a structure in which the context resonates, albeit remotely – thus in an abstracted way. Not literally, because we are always looking for the tipping point between the "fitted" and the "unadapted". This is to prevent unambiguity and to invite plural readings'. But for Monadnock, context is not everything. The firm looks for a certain autonomy of the object, allowing themselves to 'enrich the vocabulary of architecture with more exotic, imported motifs, which are emphatically not locally inspired'.

A second example of critical readings by architects who attempt to go beyond the initial objectives of the text can be found in the work of the Brussels-based firm BC Architects. Frampton's grounded architecture was through aspects such as climate, context and tectonics, so embedded in local material traditions and cultures of construction as to resist universalisation. Yet, according to BC Architects, if these aspects still have value today, it is not due to their opposition to forces of universalisation, but because of their importance for the long-term wellbeing of humankind. Practice co-founder Ken De Cooman states it eloquently: 'A project is an AND/AND/AND/AND story, in which the social, the ecological, the economic, the cultural and the temporal must be dealt with simultaneously. The pursuit of great ideas such as the 'international style', 'modernism', 'regionalism' or the 'vernacular' is no longer sufficient to give direction to the great common efforts that architectural projects are today'. Operating both in Belgium and in several locations in Africa, BC's projects are embedded in territories and building cultures; they are the result of collaborative processes based on local materials and craftsmanship. To achieve their objectives, BC need to bypass regulations proscribing the execution of the project designed. They succeed by operating through three different offices: BC Studies elaborate specific analyses for the site, in close collaboration with local craftsmen, while BC Materials expand on these analyses to actually produce building materials, and BC Architects design the projects and supervise them. Their critical regionalist character lies not so much in the built forms, nor in the embeddedness of their projects, but in a methodology enriched by these three branches.

At the last Venice Architecture Biennale, Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement to Kenneth Frampton, arguing that: 'through his work, Frampton occupies a position of extraordinary insight and intelligence combined with a unique sense of integrity'. If this prize is retrospective, it could equally be prospective. Frampton's most important text still provides a valuable framework and compelling character for young practices operating in our age of uncertainty. Reflecting on the role of his essay today Frampton recently stated: 'Our globalised capitalism is obsessed with the maximisation of profit in every field, which is a corollary of the increasing misdistribution of wealth. Under this rubric, architecture empowered by the digital is being reduced to instrumental calculation. One thinks of the role to be played by BIM. There is a tendency to split the field into two poles: either the reduction of architecture to maximise profit or a parallel reduction of built form to a kind of "fine art writ large" to sustain the "society of spectacle" as Guy Debord called it'. Frampton's engaged theory of the discipline is more important than ever, architecture needs a renewed frame of values in which the ground's topographic and political nature is fully recognised.

*This text draws on OASE 103: Critical Regionalism Revisited (May 2019), and 'Topographic Architecture: Kenneth Frampton's Interest in the Ground' by Véronique Patteeuw, from Being the Mountain, Actar, 2020*

**Extensively sketched from different angles in colourful ballpoint pens, the minimal intervention in the Caritas psychiatric hospital by De Vylder Vinck Taillieu (right) shores up the building while keeping the ruin intact**





**BC Architects' buildings betray a profound connection with the land out of which they seem to grow, such as with the Preschool of Ouled Merzoug in Morocco**



COURTESY OF BC ARCHITECTS

Copyright of Architectural Review is the property of EMAP Publishing Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.