Why Critical Regionalism Today?
Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre

The inventors of the term "Critical Regionalism," architect Alexander Tzonis and historian Liane Lefaivre here offer a history of regionalism in the twentieth century and a defense of its continued viability as a critical paradigm. Fending off accusations that regionalist architecture leads to chauvinistic nationalism and kitsch, they describe a strategy of self-examination in the tradition of the "Critiques" of philosopher Immanuel Kant and the Frankfurt School. Critical, in this specialized usage, means to challenge both the world as it exists and underlying world views. In architecture, Tzonis and Lefaivre say this is accomplished when a building is "self-reflective, self-referential, when it contains, in addition to explicit statements, implicit metasstatements."

Their idea of region is not static or closed. Furthermore, their Critical Regionalism is differentiated from past regionalist episodes, except with regard to a common concern for place and use of regional design elements to confront a universalizing architecture. The modernist technique of defamiliarization is used to represent regional elements in an unfamiliar light. The use of this poetic device forces a dialogue between building and viewer. Tzonis and Lefaivre assert that all architects have the skills for defamiliarization ("identifying, decomposing, recomposing elements"), and that regionalism does not limit architects to working in their own regions.

Tzonis and Lefaivre acknowledge a debt for their idea of regionalism to Lewis Mumford, the architectural and urban historian. In Mumford's writing of the 1940s, he was similarly concerned about the domination of technology and the limitations of the International Style. Regionalism is seen by all three writers as a secondary thread of modernism. "Why Critical Regionalism Today?" is historical, as opposed to the more polemical tone and intent of Kenneth Frampton's essay. Tzonis and Lefaivre do not propose a nostalgic recapitulation of local traditions, nor do they completely reject these traditions. A critical reevaluation of local culture, employing modernist strategies, elevates their proposed regionalism above the parochial. Finally, Critical Regionalism's acknowledgement of local environments has particular relevance as the world faces a growing ecological crisis.
In the last ten years, since the term was introduced, critical regionalism has emerged as one of the alternatives to a clearly aging modernism and to postmodernism’s younger but prematurely ailing sibling, deconstruction.

Yet for many people, even for those who believe that postmodernism is eclipsing and that deconstruction is no substitute for it, the meaning and appropriateness of regionalism is questionable. How can one be regionalist in a world that is increasingly becoming one global economically and technologically interdependent whole, where universal mobility is taking architects and users of architecture across borders and through continents at an unprecedented speed? More pointedly, how can one be regionalist today when regions in the cultural, political, social sense, based on the idea of ethnic identity, are disintegrating before our eyes? And anyway, how can one be critical and regionalist at the same time? It sounds like a contradiction in terms.

Indeed no building today is capable of arousing feelings like the ones the Cathedral of Strasbourg did in the heart of the first Romantic Regionalist, the young Goethe in 1772, that sense of individual and local architectural values symbolizing an aspiration for emancipation against universal alien design canons, a sense of belonging to a single racial community. No building can talk to the viewer directly and immediately “without the aid of a translator” as it did to him, and make the viewer rush to embrace it as Goethe wanted to embrace the Cathedral of Strasbourg. Nor can contemporary buildings possess as buildings and for John Ruskin, a mid-nineteenth century Romantic Regionalist, that strong quality of “sympathy,” “affinity,” “memory,” and “familiarity” a “deep sense of voicefulness” that convincingly speaks of past as if it were one with the present, telling us “all we need to know of national feeling or achievement.” Even less can a building still

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evoke that same sense of revolt and righteousness? To look again to the topography of the region as a source of inspiration as [Eugène Emmanuel] Viollet-le-Duc did when he took the Mont-Blanc as an archetypal image, a paradigmatic building on which to base his design for his one single building “La Vedette” can only be an exercise in anachronism today. Even less can one go back to cultivating the genius loci in the manner of the early eighteenth-century Picturesque Regionalists; those “brave Britons” who in the words of Alexander Pope used local elements as a means of manifesting their desire for emancipation from “despised” “foreign laws” and the “formal Mockery” of the absolutist classical order.

Surely [Marcel] Proust, whose very different ideas about the mechanisms of familiarization and memory evolved out of an early apprenticeship to Ruskin’s is right. Swann’s Way (1913), the first volume of À la recherche du temps perdu, finishes with the hero reflecting sadly on the houses and avenues of Combray and of the Paris of his youth that are now “all fugitive,” mere memories, irretrievable things of the past. “The reality I have known no longer exists,” he sighs. This is the sigh of a culturally, politically, ethnically, sexually ambivalent “Cosmopolitan” intellectual, but it is also the sign of a civilization that has lost identifiable regions, collective social structures, and the collective representations that went with them, a syndrome of the magic realization that community and place cannot be recaptured.

Given this loss of region, how is it possible for regionalist architecture to be anything more than, at best, a sentimental cosy indulgence in nostalgia for a bygone era, having nothing to do with Proust’s art and everything to do with what we have called Proust’s syndrome, citing highly typified regional fragments and gluing them together in a fake, a pastiche, kitsch, good only for commercial facilities, restaurants, hotels, and other emporia; or, at worst, a form of atavism, a setting for a xenophobic, neo-tribal racist hallucination. How is it possible for such a regionalist architecture, whether libertarian or totalitarian, commercial or propagandistic, in its “as-if” overfamiliarity to be anything but a kind of architectural pornography?

We would like to argue that one contemporary trend of Regionalist architecture—Critical Regionalism—is a more original movement which has come about as a response to new problems posed by contemporary global development of which it is strongly critical, and that the poetics of this new movement are to a great extent different from if not antithetical to other architectural regionalist techniques of the past. In fact the beginning of this new kind of regionalism has coincided with the realization of the obsolescence of traditional perceptions of regions as static closed entities corresponding to similarly invariant, insular groups and the outworn character of traditional regionalist architectural modes of expression. These realizations have mounted as universal culture, economy, and technology have expanded, and as regions have melted and fused into capitals, capitals into metropolises, metropolises into Patrick Geddes’s “conurbations” and Jean Gottmann’s “megapolises,” these and turn into Melvin Webber’s ultimate post-industrial “world-realms.”

This new trend of regionalism is not only a defense against the obsolescence of the region itself but also a reaction to a perverse mutation of Romantic Regionalism, the commercial as well as the totalitarian Heimatarchitektur regionalism we referred to above which spread during the decade before the Second World War. From the outset, it is clear
that this new regionalism shares with the entire tradition of regionalism since its earliest inception—Romantic Regionalism and Picturesque Regionalism—a commitment to "placeness" and a use of regional design elements as a means of confronting a universalist order of architecture that is seen as dominating or oppressive. But it also contains a new idea, one which is essential to critical regionalism that of "place" whose definition goes beyond ethnicity, not to say against the grain of nationalist insularity. Much of this discussion is to be found first in the writings of Lewis Mumford.

In his *South in Architecture*, he evokes the architecture of [Henry Hobson] Richardson as an example of regionalism in architecture. The work is not without an element of dramatizing simplicity in its account of certain complex historical phenomena. But its importance lies in Mumford's interpretation of Richardson's architecture, largely unknown at that time, as regionalist. Mumford praises his buildings for the critical confrontation and alternative they offer to the "despotric" Beaux-Arts architecture that Mumford links en masse to the imperial "exploitation and colonialization and conquest of Asia, Africa, and the Americas" as well as to what had been during Richardson's time, the East Coast banking establishment which in its architectural expression had "placed a premium upon the facade." Mumford hails Richardson for his refusal "to place the premium upon the facade" and for carrying out through regionalism the "social task of architecture."

In addition, Mumford opposes Richardson's regionalism to the totalitarian type of regionalism that is being propounded in Nazi Germany at the time. He shows that an architecture can provide an identity and express the specifics of a program without the "deification of Heimatsarchitektur," the "cult of the relics of another imperial age," and on a neo-tribal creation of a "deep unbridgeable gulf between the peoples of the earth." Mumford puts forth a concept of regionalism that upholds, on the contrary, the idea of a common humanity, explicitly free of racial or tribal or ethnic dimensions. Last but not least, Mumford uses the example of Richardson to juxtapose regionalism polemically to another kind of "despotism," that of the "mechanical order" and of the absurdities of a mindless use of technology.

After the war Mumford does not return to the attack on Heimat. His regionalist position focuses on the developing post-war International Style which he feels has deviated from the original objectives of the Modern Movement in architecture and succumbed to the very forces it was created to reform. He reacts to an architecture of false modernity that emulates modernity through the rote repetition of surface effects where once more "the premium is placed upon the facade." Thus the International Style replaces Beaux-Arts as the target of Mumford's criticism. In 1947, in his famous column "Skyline" of *The New Yorker*, the tone is provocative and polemical, almost pugnacious. Referring to Henry-Russell Hitchcock's turn to "personalism" and Sigfried Gideon's new enthusiasm for "the monumental and the symbolic," he complains that modern architecture is being subverted from within by critics who had been so closely identified with the Modern Movement's preoccupations with objectivity and plain reality. As a critical confrontation to what he sees as a debased post-war "modernism," he proposes the so-called Bay Region Style of California of William Wurster and his associates calling it a "native and humane form of modernism" which a "product of the meeting of Oriental and Occidental traditions" is "far more truly a universal style than the international style of the 1930s," because it permits regional adaptations."
The article creates an enormous stir which leads to an open debate at the Museum of Modern Art on the evening of February 11, 1948. The title “What is happening to Modern Architecture?” reflects the concerns of the organizers. The speakers include some of the main figures of post-war modernism: Alfred Barr Jr., the director of the museum, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Serge Chermayeff, George Nelson among others, and Mumford himself.

Most of the participants completely miss Mumford’s redefinition of regionalism. In spite of Mumford’s insistence that “it is a sample of internationalism, not a sample of localism and limited effort,” Alfred Barr refers to it dismissively as the Neue Gemütlichkeit, the International Cottage Style; as for Gropius, he reads into it “a chauvinistic sentimental national prejudice.” The one exception is Hitchcock. He is sensitive to the real critical impact of the notion. “Criticism—for it is criticism—that is implicit” in Mumford’s article is, according to Hitchcock, “a criticism of the International Style conceived in the limited sense...” But then he comments “that this criticism and the steps that have been taken are to be subsumed in a more general problem” which in his familiar formalist way identifies as “the problem of expression in architecture.”

Mumford’s ideas are read, praised, and dutifully ignored. Or they are subverted, as in the case of the “regionalist” epidermic concrete lace screened facades of such new projects, at that time widely published, as Edward Durrell Stone’s Pakistan Institute of Science and Technology, Walter Gropius’s University of Bagdad and Yamasaki’s entry for the United States Embassy in London. While these efforts to restore the “imperial facade” are being deployed, technocracy, bureaucracy, and real estate get their equally imperial way, with as sole result widespread anomie and atrophy.

It is in Europe that the new approach to regionalism is used as a critical confrontation of the state of architecture after the Second World War, although the word “regionalism” is rarely used. It emerges a few years after Mumford’s polemic at the MoMA. In at least one sense the Europeans develop the Mumford thesis further, the “architecturalness” with which they carry out their analysis and their capability to implement these ideas in concrete projects of often considerable scale.

In an article entitled “Regionalism and Modern Architecture” the young James Stirling juxtaposes regionalism to what he calls “the so-called International Style combined with a strong dose of monumental eclectic neo-historicism” that was dominant and promoted the “new traditionalism” taking into account the local technological and economic realities. Furthermore, Stirling designs projects for his Village Project (1955) and for his Preston Infill Housing (1957–59), which in their respective incorporation of regional and working class neighbourhood elements, make a strong implicit critique of the post-war New Monumentality.

A number of other interesting regionalist projects are designed across the same lines in England by the “new empiricists” whose regionalist outlook is influenced by Scandinavian architecture or by [Alvar] Aalto. The issue of regionalism is also discussed by Team X as a critique of New Monumentality and finds its way into several of their projects, especially in the early work of Candilis, Josic and Woods in North Africa. Also critical of the neo-formalist and technocratic architecture of the International style of the 1950s are many Italian practitioners and theoreticians, the architects of INA-Casa. Giancarlo de Carlo especially in his shops and apartment buildings in Matera, and last
but not least Ernesto Rogers, both as editorialist at *Casabella* and as designer of the Torre Velasca (1958) in Milan.

The Torre Velasca is widely covered by the press internationally and its regionalist expression as a critique of International Style was acknowledged. Gerhard Kallman writes one of the most trenchant reviews in *Architectural Forum* in February 1958. He sees it as "a valiant essay in the neglected art of fitting modern architecture into a historic continuity of building" while avoiding "folkloristic revivalism" and "sentimental eclecticism." Rogers himself in his own article for *Casabella* on "Our Responsibility toward Tradition" (August 1954) attacks the dogmatism of those modernists who "fail to realize that the modern style contrasts with the old precisely because it laid the ground for a dynamic approach to the problems" as well as of "neo-arcadian populism," which was "anachronistic if not hypocritical or downright demagogic lying."

Kenzo Tange's work in the second part of the 1950s, particularly his Kagawa Prefectural Office of 1956, the project with which Japan definitely enters the international architectural forum, significantly contributes to the specific post-war development of regionalism and to the search to redefine modern architecture in an exchange which took place in 1959 when the building was presented at the Otterlo meeting of CIAM. In response to Ernesto Rogers's enthusiastic praise of the building's regionalism as "a very good example of what we have to do," Tange's response is guarded. "I cannot accept the concept of total regionalism," he asserts, adding that "tradition can be developed through challenging its own shortcomings," implying the same for regionalism.

This last statement of Tange's encapsulates the antinomy in the thinking, partly an attachment, partly a rejection of regional elements, typical of the current practice of what we have called Critical Regionalism. This antinomy is the second essential element that goes into the definition of Critical regionalism. "Critical" here does not connote a "confrontational" attitude only. After all, as we have seen, Mumford's post war regionalism was confrontational with respect to the facadist, anomic, atopic modernism, and the attitude of romantic nineteenth-century regionalists was in open rebellion against the "imperialist" spread of the classical canon. But this does not necessarily make them critical in the more specialized sense we now apply, that is as a regionalism that is self-examining, self-questioning, self-evaluating, that not only is confrontational with regard to the world but to itself.

The idea of "critical" in this second sense, originates in the serene essays of [Immanuel] Kant and is developed in the agitated writings of the Frankfurt School. Critical works challenge not only the established actual world as confrontational works do, but the very legitimacy of the possible world views which interpret it in the mind. One might say, borrowing [Jürgen] Habermas's expression, that they "dissolve the objective illusion" in architecture. This occurs when a building is self-reflective, self-referential, when it contains, in addition to explicit statements, implicit metastatements that make the beholder aware of the artificiality of her or his way of looking at the world.

An essential characteristic of critical regionalist buildings is that they are critical in two senses then. In addition to providing contrasting images to the anomic, atopic, misanthropic ways of a large number of current mainstream projects constructed worldwide, they raise questions in the mind of the viewer about the legitimacy of the very regionalist tradition to which they belong.
The poetics of critical regionalism carry out its self-reflective function through the method of defamiliarization. “Defamiliarization” is a concept coined by the Russian literary theoretician Victor Shklovsky. It was initially applied to literature, but it can be also applied to architecture as we have demonstrated in our studies on classical architecture. But as it relates to regionalism, defamiliarization is instrumental only in its current critical phase.

Romantic regionalism, despite its confrontational stance, employed familiarization. It selected regional elements linked in memory with forlorn eras and inserted them into new buildings, constructing scenographic settings for arousing affinity and “sympathy” in the viewer, forming familiarized scenes which, although contrasting, mostly emotionally, with the actual despotic architecture, rendered consciousness insensible. The mawkish, gushing, sentimental regionalism with its overfamiliarizing, immediate, titillating “as if” narcissistic Heimat settings, has had an even more narcotic—if not hallucinatory—effect on consciousness.

Critical regionalism for its part reacts—more polemically than the period of the 1950s we referred to before—to this explosion of counterfeit regionalist settings which are even more widespread in its commercial version today than its totalitarian one in the 1970s. It selects these regional elements for their potential to act as support, physical or conceptual, of human contact and community, what we may call “place-defining” elements, and incorporates them “strangely” rather than “familiarly.” In other words it makes them appear distant, hard to grasp, difficult, even disturbing. It frames as if it were the sense of place in a strange sense of displacement. It disrupts the sentimental “embrace” between buildings and their consumers, “de-automatizing” perception and thus “pricking the conscious,” to use another of Shklovsky’s expressions. Hence, through appropriately chosen poetic devices of defamiliarization critical regionalism makes the building appear to enter into an imagined dialogue with the viewer. It sets up a process of hard cognitive negotiation in place of the fantasized surrender that follows from familiarization and the seduction that follows from overfamiliarization. It leads the viewer to a metacognitive state, a democracy of experience as Jerome Bruner might have called it, it conjures up a “forum of possible worlds.”

Current critical regionalism, emerging with Mumford’s censoring of the fake modernism of the International Style, in contrast to previous phases of regionalism, does not support the emancipation of a regional group nor does it set up one group against another. It tries to forge the identity of a “global group” in opposition to “them,” “them” being the alien occupation army of technocracy and bureaucracy imposing the illegitimate rule of anomie and atrophy. Furthermore, critical regionalism not only alerts us through the poetics of its forms to the loss of place and community but also to our “reflective” incapability to become aware of this loss while it was occurring. Its relation to a global practice of architecture is also special. The operations of identifying, decomposing, recomposing regional elements in a “defamiliarizing” way is part of the universal set of skills of architects. They can be carried out by any knowledgeable, responsible, competent architect committed to the understanding of local constraints not only by “local” ones. Critical regionalism does not imply professional parochialism.

In this brief sketch of the poetics of critical regionalism, we have not tried to identify any general criteria of style. We have not provided answers to the pragmatic questions
such as "are wooden houses less atopic than concrete ones?" or "are concrete cafeterias more anomic than brick ones?" We have not made check lists of physical design criteria of how to be a critical regionalist. And for a good reason. The poetics of critical regionalism does not include a set of design rules of partitioning, motifs and genera as does the definition of classicism, the picturesque or de Stijl. Rather, as with Neue Sachlichkeit architecture, it draws its forms from the context. In other words its general poetics become specific drawing from the regional, circumscribed constraints which have produced places and collective representations in given bound areas. To cite just one example, in the case of Spanish critical regionalism these design elements include the pragmatic purity and vivid color of jointless brick facades, the inner courts of apartment houses called corrala, the manzana patios, the miradores. These are regional elements which are historically linked with the formation of concrete urban genius loci which are selected, defamiliarized, and recomposed in new projects. 21

There is also another mode in the critical regionalist poetics, found more often in the United States, through which regional characteristics—natural rather than cultural—enter into design. This is the case of optimally composing buildings as shelters, respecting regional environmental constraints, and accepting regional resources. This is the reverse of the anomy and atrophy resulting when nature is violated through brute force to control environmental conditions— not force as such, but as a cause of the hubris of mind spent on nothing, a hubris present even when there is money and machinery to spend, combined with the hubris of the mean view of the world which the project in its "gluttony" implies. In other words, placeness and the containment of anomic and atropic are supported by the implicit messages of a well tempered, "economical," "ecological" design.

One cannot say on the other hand by looking at a building, as one can do for classical temples for instance, this is a well-formed critical regionalist building. As Kenneth Frampton, the critic whose writings have helped raise and spread the issue of critical regionalism more than any other today, has made the point very clearly:

The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place.
It is clear from the above that Critical Regionalism depends upon maintaining a high level of critical self-consciousness. It may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site. 22

Neither have we tried to argue that critical regionalism should be seen as contradictory to trends towards higher technology and a more global economy and culture. It merely opposes their undesirable contingent byproducts borne of private interests and public mindlessness.

It seems that after two highly creative but also frustrating decades, during which architecture has oscillated between dreaming socially engaged visions completely outside the conceptual and practical framework of architecture and actualizing socially vacuous exercises within the autonomous formal framework of architecture, we are coming closer to a more balanced outlook, closer to reality. One of the issues which identify this new
outlook is the problem of the architecture of place, the articulation of a critical statement in terms of shape and space about community in a world of global mobility and integration. Critical regionalism appears as a movement seriously engaged in this problem. This gives us enough ground to claim that it has emerged as one of the most exciting approaches in architecture today.


See W. Goethe’s Von deutscher Baukunst, N. Pevsner, trans., in Architectural Review XCVIII, 155ff. In the text, Goethe argues, erroneously, that the Gothic was German. In fact the Gothic was French. It is generally accepted that the first Gothic building was the abbey church of St. Denis in the Ile de France, supervised by the abbot Suger for his patrons, the Capetian dynasty. For a general background on the subject of the role of Goethe in the Gothic revival in Germany see W.D. Robson-Scott, The Literary Background of the Gothic Revival in Germany (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).


For an outline of the biography of regionalism starting from its earliest, “emblematic” phase in the early renaissance and continuing through to the Picturesque Regionalism of the eighteenth century and the Romantic Regionalism of the nineteenth century, see our “Regionalismo critico y la arquitectura espanola actual,” in A & V 3 (Madrid: 1985): 4-19.


Ibid.: 18.

Ibid.: 9.

See Architect’s Year Book no. 8 (1937).

New Monumentality is an expression coined by Giedion to the monumental architecture of the 1930s.

I. Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason (1791).


Shklovsky was a member of the “Russian Formalists,” the avant-garde group of literary theoreticians active around the time of the Russian revolution. See Shklovsky’s “Art as technique,” in L.T. Lemon and M. Reis, eds., Russian Formalist Critique (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

