

The Critical Past

Prologue

‘All history is inescapably conditioned by a mode of beholding.’¹

My dog-eared copy of *Post-Modern Culture*, the book in which I first encountered Kenneth Frampton’s essay “Towards A Critical Regionalism”, is now over thirty years old. It is an object from history, both architectural and personal. The pages are yellowing and those containing Frampton’s essay have scribbled notes and underlined quotes. Reading it again, it strikes me that I would not underline the same passages. This essay is in part an attempt to understand why. But it is more generally an attempt to explore the passage of architectural time and the place of Frampton’s essay within it.

This paper proposes a re-reading of Frampton’s essay in relation to the role of history. For Frampton, the renewed interest in architectural history evident in the First International Architecture Exhibition of Venice (1980) represented a rejection of modernism’s commitment to both technological and social progress. He objected to the exhibition’s deployment of visual signifiers of this history - most evident in the display of architectural facades in the Strada Novissima – as symptomatic of capitalism’s urge towards commodification and consumption. What does it mean to revisit Frampton’s arguments thirty years on? What kinds of historical view informed his essay? And how does Critical Regionalism’s supposed resistance to historicist readings of architecture deal with its own history?

History Repeats

‘...any recovery of historical forms in architecture is a return to outmoded and authoritarian modes of thought.’²

In order to understand Frampton’s “Critical Regionalism” essay it is important to place it within the context of his other writing. The essay was preceded in 1980 by his book *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. In this more general work, Frampton traced the crosscurrents of modernism up to and during the twentieth century. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* is split into three sections: the first follows the period leading up to modernism, the second its main developments during the twentieth century and the third a reassessment of that history and – in Frampton’s words – its ‘extension into the present.’ The book therefore moves from a general history of modernism to a prescriptive analysis of contemporary architectural practice.

Frampton's "Critical Regionalism" essay developed out of the book's final two chapters (entitled "Critical Regionalism: Modern Architecture" and "Cultural Identity and World Architecture and Reflective Practice"). Subsequent editions of *A Critical History* absorbed further aspects of the later essay forming a sort of critical feedback loop. As Alan Colquhoun observed in his review of the first edition of *A Critical History* (a review commissioned by Frampton himself and included within a special edition of *Architectural Design* edited by him entitled "Modern Architecture and the Critical Present"), the book contains changes of tone and register that reflect shifts in Frampton's historiographical methodology. In moving from a historical survey to a theoretical position – that is from an objective to an operative history – the book poses a number of challenges. Not least amongst these is the instrumental nature of Frampton's reading of architectural history. No history is ever neutral but *A Critical History* negotiates an explicit step-change from analysis to prescription.

The book combines a traditional art historical mode of registering and recognising an architectural canon with a wider social and political history of the twentieth century of which modern architecture is a part. This socio/political history framing provides a context for a largely familiar roll-call of individual architects and a broadly linear sense of progression, one with which we are familiar with from previous histories of modernism by Nikolaus Pevsner, Siegfried Gideon and others. Although Frampton's history places considerable emphasis on the wider historical situation out of which individual architectural examples emerged, the flow of that history and the supposed inevitability of modernism is a familiar one. Typical chapter titles typify this conflation, for example: Adolf Loos and the Crisis of Culture or Mies van der Rohe and the Significance of Fact.

In this sense Frampton attempts to synthesise – not always successfully – a split that Nancy Stieber identifies in her essay "Space, Time and Architectural History": "An audience still exists for the monograph dedicated to the career of a particular architect, tracing the development of ideas and forms in the light of biography. However, the more interesting questions about architecture and its history are being posed by historians exploring problems and not styles".³

Post Modernism versus Critical Regionalism

A Critical History shifts to a more explicitly operative methodology in its final two chapters. Frampton 'reads' the recent events of modern architecture in such a way that Critical Regionalism appears a logical and necessary reaction to it. For Frampton, the optimisation of technique and the universalising tendencies of global capitalism have combined to threaten

architecture's capacity to make meaningful form. Modernism – the unavoidable consequence of industrialisation – has itself become the tool of global capitalism.

Modern Architecture: A Critical History leads to this conclusion in a number of ways. At an operative level, a myth of progress is enshrined within its own methodology: it is a linear history of modernism. Frampton constructs this myth over the course of the book only to begin its deconstruction towards the end. It is as if doubts start to set in about its underlying methodology even before he has finished it. Not only does he shift register to a more prescriptive mode of criticism, he starts to undermine and critique the more objective form of historiography that he began with.

Having identified a crisis in modernism's forward trajectory, Frampton cannot accept Post-Modernism's response which he dismisses as; '...the conscious ruination of style and the cannibalisation of architectural form, as though no value either traditional or otherwise can withstand for long the tendency of the production/consumption cycle to reduce every civic institution to some kind of consumerism.'⁴ For Frampton, Post-Modernism was incapable of resisting the totalising forces of globalisation or of articulating a progressive political reaction to it. As he was to put it in an essay in *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, 'Architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it...distances itself equally from the enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the preindustrial past.'⁴

Sites of Resistance

'Today the practice of architecture seems to be increasingly polarised between, on the one hand, a so-called "high-tech" approach predicated exclusively upon production and, on the other, the provision of a "compensatory façade" to cover up the harsh realities of this universal system.'⁵

In "Towards A Critical Regionalism", Frampton outlines his prescription for an architecture that can resist both universal modernism and historicist post-modernism. He does this via 'six points for an architecture of resistance'. The first two of these points respond to the erosion of influence of both the architect and the avant-garde to affect material societal change. The following four points articulate how architecture might 'resist' this erosion and, specifically, the universalising tendencies of contemporary capitalist culture. These points represent the core of Frampton's prescription. They focus on principles of construction, typology and site that cannot – at least in Frampton's terms – be reducible to either commercial imagery or abstract experience. Each is seen in dialectical terms as a mediation between normative and industrialised processes and the specific and particular qualities of place.

Frampton's cultivation of the importance of the physical site becomes the focus for resisting the 'placelessness' inherent within contemporary culture as well as the 'compensatory façade' offered by Post Modernism. Using Heidegger's metaphysics as a source, Frampton distinguishes between the supposed authentic properties of place and the abstractions of architectural and universal space. While place can be experienced physically via physical, haptic and tactile qualities, space is part of capitalism's abstract systems of value. The cultivation of the physical properties of the site is then – for Frampton – a meaningful way to resist the forces of globalised capitalism.

It is in dealing with the concepts of place and site that Frampton's rejection of history is most acute. In resisting what he regards as a historicist agenda, Frampton posits a binary opposition between culture and nature. Further, he attempts to embrace the latter as somewhere in which architecture can cultivate an authentic ontology of place. In doing so, he excludes the historical (cultural) context of the site - and of architecture more generally - as a legitimate condition for architects to respond to. Frampton's "architecture of resistance" asserts the physical and sensory experience of place over architectural or cultural space.

The essay "On Site"⁶, by Carol Burns is useful in relation to Frampton's position. In her essay Burns describes two opposing tendencies: the 'Cleared Site' and the 'Constructed Site'. The former lacks '... any prior constructions and (is) empty of content. It posits space as objective and "pure", a neutral mathematical object.' The latter 'emphasises the visible physicality, morphological qualities and existing conditions of land *and architecture*' (my emphasis). Burns goes on to say that; '...the mathematical compartmentalising of space – indeed one could say the concept of space itself – posits the idea that there is no real difference between one grid square and another.' Further, as Burns demonstrates, there is a close etymological link between words like 'plot' used to describe an area of land and 'lot' with its connotations of financial value and the trading of goods. The 'Cleared Site'⁶, is one that can be measured, packaged and sold. The 'Constructed Site' on the other hand emphasises the unique characteristics of a place as well as its challenges to the optimal and efficient use of space. To 'build the site' is to accept the complexities of its topography, orientation and morphology, not to erase them in an effort to rationalise the construction process.

But my emphasis added to Burns' quote above reminds us that the primal reading of site as 'pure' topography or as a series of 'natural' phenomena that exist outside human action is a highly problematic one. Not only does it ignore the history of inhabitation and previous occupation of a site – occupations that will undoubtedly have left their mark on the land in all sorts of ways – it ignores the cultural readings that underpin our concept of site and nature to start with. To label a site as 'natural' is already to co-opt it within a cultural taxonomy whatever the level of physical marking on the actual site.

Similarly, Frampton's reading of 'site' is heavily freighted with cultural baggage even if he assumes that the site is not. This critique should not perhaps be overstated. We 'know' what Frampton means when he describes a reaction to the site through specific and potentially unique moves. And we can see – like Burns – that there are very different conceptions of how to approach a site which reveal different ideological attitudes. As Frampton concedes, 'Building the Site allows; '... the specific culture of the region – that is to say, its history in both a geological and agricultural sense – to become inscribed.' Note though that the architectural history of a site is not mentioned. The previous uses of a site considered relevant are ones that are broadly to do with either a pre-architectural or non-architectural programme.

Given Frampton's nuanced and critical understanding of modernism's history, his largely uncritical deployment of this concept of naturalness seems strange. And his positing of a supposed embedding of architecture within a specific of place as a way of resisting capitalist culture seems optimistic. Frampton bases this 'resistance' on the particularities of place in opposition to the universalising tendencies of capitalist space. But the cultivation of uniqueness, of local character and place – is something that capitalism exploits on a daily basis. The idea that a nuanced understanding of, say, the topographic qualities of a site, resists processes of commodification seems naïve when seen within the complex nexus of mythology and marketing of contemporary consumerism.

Frampton rejects the tabula rasa approach of modernism but he also rejects the complexities that come with the Constructed Site. Given the emphasis on a subtle reading of the physical properties of place, it might seem strange that Frampton has little to say about many of its historical properties. How does one ignore previous forms of inhabitation? And, more problematically: how does one escape from the cultural values which we as architects bring to the site? Can a concern for reflecting topography or local climate really be a vehicle for political resistance?

Conclusion

Frampton articulates an approach to architecture that aims to resist globalised capitalism whilst remaining committed to a version of progressive modernism. This resistance is based on a metaphysics of both place and construction that attempts to avoid the emphasis on history and visual signification of Post Modernism. Frampton's concept of site is one where issues of light, climate and topography are both palpable and acute. And it is one that is both real and a state of mind, physically remote but also beyond history and architectural culture.

Frampton's emphasis on the unmediated experience of topography or climate implies sites that are non-urban and where the building programmes intended for them are discrete and bespoke. He focuses on such sites and programmes because they are the only ones where any form of built context or architectural history can be plausibly absent. To avoid what he sees as the trap of Post Modernism, Frampton has to travel to a place where there is no architectural history to refer to.

In rejecting history, Frampton also conflates it with visual culture. For him, the use of history within architectural design is largely reducible to a repertoire of visual tropes. Further these visual tropes are seen as synonymous with commercialism and capital exploitation. As Nancy Stieber writes in *Space, Time and Architectural History* this 'distrust of the visual' assumes the visual to be a tool of oppression; 'The aesthetics of urban design and architecture are viewed primarily as part of an ideological armatorium that represents power whilst providing a veneer of beauty that conceals oppressive relations. Such beauty is suspect: illusory, seductive, false and misleading, a bearer of ideology.'⁸

Frampton sets up an opposition between an inauthentic and politically suspect visual language of architectural history and an authentic and non-visual experience of the site conceptualised as a primal condition which we can relate to through supposedly unmediated physiological sensations; i.e. smell, touch, sound. In emphasising this, Frampton also re-instates a disciplinary boundary between the critic and the architect. While the critics job is to assess history and position a contemporary architecture in relation to it, Frampton suggests that the architect work within an a-historical present. The 'criticality' that is common to the title of both Frampton's essay and the book that proceeded it is assumed to exist only within a written form. For Frampton, historical imagery is always reducible to suspect ideology and is always reactionary and uncritical. Built history, or the incorporation of historical references within architectural composition, is held to be reactionary in a way that written history is not. Criticality remains within the orbit of the critic but not the architect.

"Towards a Critical Regionalism" is now a significant part of architectural history itself. To read it today is to track back through architectural time and to trace the outlines of an older debate. These outlines are like those of the architectural site and have been built on

many times. Paradoxically, Frampton's assertion of the physical experience of site over its cultural or architectural history developed out of a re-evaluation of modernism, a *critical history*. An essay that can be seen in many ways as a rejection of that history has inevitably become part of it. Ultimately it is no more possible for the critic than the architect to escape architecture's past.

Notes

¹ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1992), 07.

² Alan Colquhoun, 'Modern Architecture and the Liberal Conscience', in: Kenneth Frampton (ed.) *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, (London, Architectural Design, 1982), 47- 49.

³ Nancy Stieber, 'Space Time and Architecture', in: Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Ozkaya (eds) *Rethinking Architectural Histiography*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2006), 177

⁴ Kenneth Frampton, 'Modern Architecture and the Liberal Conscience', in: Kenneth Frampton (ed.) *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present*, (London, Architectural Design, 1982). 47-49.

⁵ Kenneth Frampton. 'Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Post Modern Culture* (London; Pluto Press, 1985), 21.

⁶ Carol Burns, 'On Site', in: Andrea Kahn (ed), *Drawing, Building, Text* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991). 147 – 167.

⁷ Carol Burns, 'On Site', in: Andrea Kahn (ed), *Drawing, Building, Text* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991). 147 – 167.

⁸ Nancy Stieber, 'Space Time and Architecture', in: Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Ozkaya (eds) *Rethinking Architectural Histiography*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2006), 177