

Critical Regionalism Symposium

TU Delft
2014-03-20

The Ambiguities of Critical Regionalism

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2014-03-20

Introduction

In 1987, the Spanish architect and critic Ignasi de Solà-Morales argued that **aesthetic experiences**, though occupying a peripheral position in contemporary world's referential system, have the value of a paradigm that **enables us to escape the routine brought about by the hopes and delusions of the modern project**.

For Solà-Morales, the importance of the peripheral position of contemporary aesthetic experiences is vital to preserve their **power to unveil the intense apprehension of reality, which is neither absolute nor constructed on the basis of universal rationality**. Hence, the crisis caused by the impossibility to establish a universal system or the pretention to the totality of an ontological system can only be tackled by rejecting fundamentalist drives and, instead, favouring a **weak approach** based on a notion of temporality that

*"does not present itself as a system but as an aleatory instant that, responding above all to chance, is produced in an unforeseeable place and moment."*¹

He champions, then, a **weak architecture, contingent and fragmentary, produced through folds and fissures**.

One of the fundamental tenets of Solà-Morales' weak architecture, a notion borrowed from Gianni Vattimo's concepts of *weak thought* and *weak ontology*, is its **keen commitment in denying being transformed into a central experience**.

*"The present-day artistic universe," he claims, "is perceived from experiences that are produced at discrete points, diverse, heterogeneous to the highest degree, and consequently our approximation to the aesthetic is produced in a weak, fragmentary, peripheral fashion."*²

Hence, I would argue that Solà-Morales' novel conceptualization of weak architecture, in 1987, could be used to frame the post-structuralist architectural debate that sought **an alternative to the universalist ethos of high modernism**. This alternative, I will argue, was supported by a **dialectic between periphery and centre** as an instrumental approach to avoid what Solà-Morales called absolute and universal apprehensions of reality.

¹ Ignasi Solà-Morales, "Weak Architecture," in *Architecture Theory Since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2000), 622.

² *Ibid.*, 618.

When the Periphery Becomes the Centre

It became noticeable in the early 1970s in the work of some architects developing their work in a liminal position that could be defined as **the periphery of the core of the world system**.³

The Portuguese **Álvaro Siza** was one of those architects. In fact, Siza's works would eventually become regular appearance in trade media to illustrate what Solà-Morales considered the instrumental value of peripheral artistic experiences.

One of these critics was **Kenneth Frampton**, who in the early 1980s presented the notion of **critical regionalism** as a theoretical construct that could offer an alternative to the populist drive of architectural postmodernism in challenging the tenets of high modernism.

To be sure, in Siza's writings and interviews he often praised a disciplinary approach that, first and foremost, ought to be able to deliver a qualified outcome, one that should **overcome the temptation of just delivering "what people want."** Moreover, he contended architects should reject the idea "that the urgency of the problems could constitute a limiting factor to quality and poetry."⁴

Siza's poetic approach mingled with his critical reading of reality would be singled out and highlighted by Kenneth Frampton, who considered Siza an architect with a *"hyper-sensitivity towards the inherent nature of a given-site."*⁵

This **site-sensitivity** was, in fact, a central tenet for Frampton's notion of critical regionalism as an architectural approach that was able to bring together the best from universal civilization and local cultures, a challenge he borrowed from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.⁶

Dwelling heavily on Ricoeur's 1961 essay "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", Frampton's conceptualization of critical regionalism would bring about **the periphery of the core of the world system as the locus where resistant architectural practices emerged**. However, if this resistance was targeted to **avoid the commodification of the machine tropes of high modernism**, it was, I would argue, especially directed to **counter the populist drive of postmodernism**.

³ Immanuel Wallerstein, "Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis," *Theory and Society* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 1976): 461–83.

⁴ Álvaro Siza, "The Line of Action of the Technicians as Technicians," *Lotus International*, no. 13 (December 1976): 87.

⁵ Kenneth Frampton, "Poesis and Transformation: The Architecture of Alvaro Siza," in *Alvaro Siza. Professione Poetica / Poetic Profession*, ed. Pierluigi Nicolini (Milano: Edizioni Electa, 1986), 10.

⁶ Cf. Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend (WA): Bay Press, 1983), 16–30. In this essay and in further discussion of critical regionalism, Frampton dwells on Paul Ricoeur's notions of universal civilization and local cultures. See Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 271–84. This essay was originally published in French in 1961 in the journal *Esprit*.

In effect, the emergence of the notion of critical regionalism in the early 1980s was arguably the most conspicuous opponent to the growing influence of postmodernism in architectural culture.

This is clearly stated when, in 1981, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre originally coined the term, as well as in Kenneth Frampton's later elaboration on that notion, from 1983 on.⁷

For these authors, **the common opponent was the reactionary and populist resonances of the postmodern discourse.**

Frampton, in fact, would eventually admit that his interest on the notion of critical regionalism was sparked by two events: the publication in 1977 of Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, and the anti-modern drive of the architecture section of the 1980 Venice Biennale, whose theme was "The Presence of the Past."⁸ On the one hand, Frampton considered that postmodernity was fuelled by the loss of an enlightened secular vision sparked by the triumph of multinational capitalism and the apparent departure of socialism from the world stage, leaving the world socially, culturally, and economically adrift.⁹

On the other hand, he also acknowledged that the utopian premises of the project of modernity had already been superseded by the internal rationality of instrumental reason. Hence, in his "Towards a Critical Regionalism," he used the teachings of Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School to advocate an idea of resistance and critical attitude. He contended,

*"Architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an arrière-garde position, that is to say, one which 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."*¹⁰

Frampton thus envisioned **critical regionalism equidistantly positioned between progressive and reactionary impulses.** Further, he used Paul Ricoeur's optimistic possibility to **reconcile universal civilization and local culture** as a guiding light for his contention that,

⁷ The term was first used in Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, "The Grid and the Pathway. An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis with Prolegomena to a History of the Culture of Modern Greek Architecture," *Architecture in Greece*, no. 15 (1981): 164–78. Frampton borrowed the term from Tzonis and Lefaivre in two essays published in 1983. See Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance"; Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," *Perspecta* 20 (1983): 147–62.

⁸ See Kenneth Frampton, "If It Is Reduced to an Aesthetic Package Architecture Loses the Game from the Modernising Force of the Megatrend," in *Context and Modernity. A Post-Seminar Reading*, ed. Gerard Bergers (Delft: Stylos, 1991), 30.

⁹ This premise alone raises many questions about Frampton's reading of the world at that time, which was noticeably framed by his position in the core of the world-system from the western perspective. For a insightful debate about this, see Keith L. Eggner, "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism," *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 55, no. 4 (May 1, 2002): 228–37.

¹⁰ Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," 20.

"only an arrière-garde has the capacity to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique."¹¹

Interestingly, however, was the fact that Frampton found the best examples of that resistant culture in **peripheral practices**, chiefly springing from the **individual genius** of an architect whose works seemingly avoid the contaminations brought about by global capitalism.

In his "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," for example, Frampton carefully curates a selection of architects from such different places as Japan (Tadao Ando), Mexico (Luis Barragan), Denmark (Jorn Utzon), Switzerland (Mario Botta) and Portugal (Álvaro Siza), to illustrate his notion of resistant architectural practices. However, as Keith Eggener contends, this center/periphery thinking created *"a theoretical construct that inadvertently marginalized and conflated the diverse architectural tendencies it championed."*¹²

Hence, **Frampton's notion of critical regionalism** assumed an ambivalent tone. On the one hand, it praised **a resistant practice**, one that was able to challenge the commodification of the architectural artefact. On the other hand, it was charged with a kind of **paternalistic reverence for peripheral practices**, whose "contaminated" modernity was assessed using as framework the "pure" and canonical modernity produced in the countries belonging to the core of the world-system.

Il Pensiero Debole: Modernity at the Periphery

In his essay "Weak Architecture", Solà-Morales himself, notes that the critical apparatus suggested by his notion of **weak architecture** resonates with the dialectical approach and non conformist position suggested by Kenneth Frampton's take on the idea of critical regionalism, which the latter developed from 1983 on.

Further, according to K. Michael Hays, in his introduction to the republication of Solà-Morales essay in the anthology *Architecture Theory since 1968*, the work of the Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza, produced even before the 1980s, could already be seen as an instance of *il pensiero debole*, or weak thought.

Hays highlights, however, that it is not completely detached from the tenets of modernism. He argues, in effect, that a work such as Siza's

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Eggener, "Placing Resistance," 228.

"arises from a modernist understanding of production, tectonic density, and compositional rigor."

However, Hays goes on, this understanding is now

"coupled with what Heidegger called an Andenken or recollection, a keeping-in-mind of the modernist tradition, a willingness to traverse it once again, but not to return uncritically to its heroism."¹³

Following Solà-Morales and Michael Hays, there is thus **a concatenation between the possibility of critically continuing the modernist tradition and favouring an artistic production emerging from the periphery of the world's referential system.** Further, Álvaro Siza's work and Frampton's championing of critical regionalism are presented as tokens of an approach that **negotiates the disciplinary ethos of architectural modernism with the contingencies of the real.**

According to K. Michael Hays, the work of Álvaro Siza illustrates an architectural approach that uses *il pensiero debole* to negotiate the modernist *Andenken* with the contingencies of the real. I would further contend that this quality could be seen as the distinctive characteristic of a peripheral modernism that explores the possibility to **escape from the postmodern predicament that offers the logic of pure difference to counter the commodification of modernism's logic of complete identity.**

Modernity, Difference and Identity

The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos has been arguing for a long time now that Portugal occupies **a semi-peripheral position,**

[one] "of intermediation between the centre and the periphery of the world economy; a state which, being both product and producer of an intermediate position, never assumed fully the liberal state since mid-nineteenth century."¹⁴

Immanuel Wallerstein has already suggested the concept of semi-periphery in 1976 as an intermediary position between the polarised categories of the world-system, acting, however, as transmission belts and political agents of an imperial power.¹⁵ However, Santos challenges Wallerstein's negative tone on the concept of semi-periphery and contends that it rather

¹³ K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2000), 614.

¹⁴ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Inter-Identity," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 39, no. 2 (December 1, 2002): 9.

¹⁵ See Wallerstein, "Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis."

resonates with a position that performs a specific role in the world system. He argues, thus, that in cases such as the Portuguese,

*"forced to play the game of modern binarism, it was hard for them to know which side they were on. Neither Prospero nor Caliban, they were left with liminality and the borderland, and with inter-identity as original identity."*¹⁶

This **liminal position**, I would argue, resonates also with the idea of critical regionalism, and could be useful to understand why Frampton used Siza's work as a good illustration of that idea.¹⁷ Hence, following Boaventura Sousa Santos idea, I would suggest that, for Frampton, **critical regionalism as a resistant architectural approach has to dwell between the myth of progress and linear time, and the nostalgia for the past**, creating, therefore, its own inter-identity as original identity.

Frampton delivers, however, an ambiguous moral assessment on that liminal position. On the one hand he argues that,

[critical regionalism] *"continues to flourish sporadically within the cultural fissures that articulate in unexpected ways the continents of Europe and America."*

He calls these manifestations **"interstices of freedom"**, after Abraham Moles, and he contents that,

*"their existence is proof that the model of the hegemonic center surrounded by dependent satellites is an inadequate and demagogic description of our cultural potential."*¹⁸

On the other hand, however, he seems to validate that model, arguing that,

[critical regionalism intends to] *"identify those recent regional 'schools' whose aim has been to represent and serve, in a critical sense, the limited constituencies in which they are grounded."*¹⁹

It seems, thus, that **those "interstices of freedom" are only aimed at serving a well-defined and limited constituency**, the periphery of the world-system, denying them its right to perform in the same stage as modernist practices emerging from the core of that world-system.

¹⁶ Santos, "Between Prospero and Caliban," 24.

¹⁷ Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," 20.

¹⁸ Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," 149.

¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

The American thinker Fredric Jameson came across Frampton's notion of critical regionalism as part of his interest in postmodernism as the specialization of culture under the pressure of organized capitalism.²⁰

In 1994, he compared critical regionalism's slogans of **marginality and resistance with those of contemporary evocations of multiculturalism**. He suggests that while the latter are urban and internal First World, the first are geographically distant from the core of the world-system, located in Frampton's "systematically remote" examples, such as Denmark, Catalonia, Portugal, México, California in the 1920s and 1930s, Ticino, Japan and Greece."²¹

And Jameson goes on contending that

*Such areas are not so much characterized by the emergence of strong collective identities as they are by their relative distance from the full force of global modernization, a distance that provided a shelter or an eco-niche in which regional traditions could still develop.*²²

It is this distance from "global modernization" that somehow pushes critical regionalist architectural approaches to a condition of ambivalence.

Global Difference as Global Identity

In Fredric Jameson's account on critical regionalism, he argues that, though Frampton posits it as an alternative to postmodernist populism, its resistance to standardization paradoxically echoes a **"postmodern marketing**, which is tailored "to 'respect' the values and cultures of the local population by adapting its various goods to suit those vernacular languages and practices."

And Jameson goes on arguing that

"now the 'regional' as such becomes the business of global American Disneyland-related corporations, who will redo your own native architecture for you more exactly than you can do it yourself."

Therefore, he asks,

²⁰ In 1990, Jameson has participated in a seminar on critical regionalism, held at the Faculty of Architecture at Delft University of Technology. Among the other participants were Kenneth Frampton, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre. The last two coined in 1981 the concept of critical regionalism. See Gerard Bergers, ed., *Context and Modernity. A Post-Seminar Reading* (Delft: Stylos, 1991).

²¹ Fredric Jameson, "The Constraints of Postmodernism (Extract)," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 248.

²² *Ibid.*, 249.

"is Global Difference the same today as Global Identity?"²³

Siza's architectural approach highlights **the ambivalence between encouraging the creation of spatial identity by preserving vernacular traditions and the creation of difference using foreign languages**. Siza performs a mediatory role between what Paul Ricoeur defined as universal civilization and local culture, which Frampton reproduced in the epigraph of his foundational essay on critical regionalism.

Siza stands, thus, in-between these two realms, bridging the gap between them. In this position, Siza's architectural approach could thus illustrate Solà Morales' notion of *weak architecture* for its *"power to unveil the intense apprehension of reality, which is neither absolute nor constructed on the basis of universal rationality."*

²³ Ibid., 255.