REGIONALISM AND CULTURE IN DESIGN EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

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"Regionalism" has many advantages as a conceptual framework for design education, not the least of which is its emphasis on process over style. Regionalism requires that architecture reflect its time, place and culture and that it link the past, the present, and perhaps the future. In a time characterized by alarming worldwide homogeneity on the one hand and by apparent eclectic diversity on the other, regionalism focuses on sets of values and attitudes that have conditioned architecture throughout its history and that are independent of style. The ability of architecture and urban design to draw inspiration from and contribute to the particular special qualities of its context is a fundamental source of its meaning and richness. In terms of education, therefore, regionalism encompasses not only an architectural theory, but a study of culture as well. "By culture we mean not only the arts, literature or aesthetic canons of societies, but, more importantly, the underlying codes of operation on which symbolism, ethical priorities, behavior patterns and systems of knowledge are based."[1] Since characteristics of culture affect the realization of buildings in concrete terms, the architect with a regionalist approach must consider a broadly based humanism as part of his/her professionalism.

The problem of defining regionalism is, of course, central to the task of the educator intent upon conveying a coherent body of knowledge. Regionalism is clearly not a style, for the term itself implies variability in form. To say that regionalism is simply one aspect of "good architecture" is to eliminate the discourse by subsuming it in an infinitely larger inquiry. However, to say that regionalism emphasizes a process of design is to reinforce the best in architectural education; and to say that regionalism espouses a particular set of values and attitudes is to focus on its potential for influence. Thus, regionalism can be taught within an existing curriculum, assuming that the curriculum is based on teaching of design process informed by professional skills. Within this framework, regionalist values may be considered in two contexts: theories and skills.

Examination of existing vernacular building traditions is a starting point for theoretical considerations of regionalism, insofar as architecture is

seen to embody values and processes particular to a culture. The history of interpretation and transformation of indigenous traditions is revealing of its persistent timeless qualities as well as its ability to sustain change. One need only study the work of an architect like Geoffrey Bawa of Sri Lanka to understand how long-established attitudes toward landscape, climate and shelter may be reflected in buildings which have no actual architectural precedent in the past.

Bawa's work, however, suggests a problem in thinking about a theory of regionalism. Reliance on vernacular traditions as a source of essential architectural vocabulary can imply a somewhat static definition of cultural values. Although Bawa's work is too original and lyrical to be termed "sentimental", it suggests a synthesis rather than an evolution of architectural thinking. "Critical Regionalism" adds an ingredient, as explained by Kenneth Frampton: "By definition, critical regionalism is a recuperative, self-conscious, critical endeavor, and nothing can be further from the vernacular in the initial sense of the term."[2] While by no means devaluing vernacular traditions, Frampton focuses attention on processes of critique and reinterpretation. This is a highly self-conscious process which, however, can facilitate an architecture which "mediates" between the homogenizing tendencies of modern design thinking and the particular identities of culture. The houses built by Mario Botta in the Ticino region of Switzerland are exemplary of this approach, insofar as contemporary architectural theory and technics are informed by regional attitudes toward landscape and building materiality.

In contrast to Frampton's self-consciousness is Thomas Schumacher's notion that "regional differences, like certain ethnic traits, are perhaps best left alone to percolate up through the structure of more universal values."[3] There are two operative assumptions here. The first is that what we call "regionalism" may only be what has been traditionally known as "good architecture." Site and climate, available technology, and program as a statement of function and values have always been fundamental influences on architecture. Even the impositions of colonial regimes abroad have been tempered by adaptation to local conditions. The period of the twentieth century when local conditions were submerged by technological uniformity has been relatively brief in the history of architecture.

The second assumption in Schumacher's statement is that geography, climate, and available materials do not explain many aspects of regional architecture. Citing Thomas Jefferson's use of Georgian architecture in Virginia, H.H.Richardson's use of Romanesque architecture in New England, and Louis Kahn's work in Ahmedabad, India, Schumacher highlights the importance of personal insight in the importation of ideas. In each case, these architectures became nuclei of thinking about

architecture in their respective places. Although not indigenous styles, they became associated with their regions -- a new kind of vernacular.

For similar reasons, even indigenous architecture is rarely a spontaneous product of its locale, but usually a product of ideas imposed or imported from the outside and modified by local conditions. Thus, the vernacular to which Geoffrey Bawa responds is a product of colonial and local ideas, transformed by contemporary requirements and Bawa's personal vision. In another context, Sedad Eldem of Turkey found inspiration for his work in Turkish houses, themselves the varied products of many Asian and European influences.

Thus, while not denying regional influences, Schumacher points out the importance of the intellectual climate of a place, recognizing that the world of ideas need not be bounded by geography. To summarize his position, he quotes Michael Dennis: "Regionalism is a chronological, not a geographical, idea."[4] The implication is that a wide variety of architectural ideas may be explored in the solution of an architectural problem, so long as the fundamentals of realizing buildings are respected. Indeed, "intellectual climate" must be added to the list of regional considerations.

While definitions of regionalism have been explicitly proposed by theorists, regionalist values are implicit in the work of many practicing architects. Analysis of the work of such disparate figures as Hassan Fathy of Egypt, Luis Barragan of Mexico, and Tadeo Ando of Japan, to name just a few, illuminates the variety of inspirations to be found in vernacular building traditions, landscape, climate, technology and culture. At the same time, their work addresses more general architectural issues and thereby gains importance beyond the borders of a region. For example, Fathy seeks to revive ancient building practices and materials and to emphasize continuity within his culture. He avoids nostalgia through his rigorously disciplined design process, by which he responds to climate, economics, and programmatic requirements. In contrast, Luis Barragan has been strongly influenced by European Modernism. The abstract compositional formality of his work is given scale and humanity through the use of colors, materials, and landscape forms indigenous to Mexico. Tadeo Ando, on the other hand, relies almost entirely on abstract qualities of space and ritual to achieve connection with the cultural history of Japan, while his unrelentingly severe use of concrete and glass is an uncompromising statement of twentieth century technology.

In the work of practicing architects, the interaction of contemporary issues and timeless qualities drawn from local culture is an appropriate subject of analysis for students of regionalism. The third ingredient to be identified is the aesthetic choice exercised by architects; although relying on the other two ingredients for validity, personal vision also contributes qualities not to be found in the vernacular.

Thus, while vernacular architecture is regional, regionalist architecture need not be in the vernacular. Regionalist values can be defined in terms of theory related to building practice; these values are inseparable from interaction with more general architectural issues facing the world community and with the personal visions of builders. The unique mix of these three factors defines a dynamic and evolving regionalism.

The second category of consideration for the educator is the teaching of skills which are specific to a regionalist approach. The ability to "read" and analyze vernacular landscapes, urban forms and building typologies is implicit in the discussion above. Understanding of technological choices based upon climate, material availability, economics and skill of the labor force is equally important, although not always as thoroughly considered in architecture schools.

A skill of a different kind is the ability to "read" culture, particularly as it is manifest in built form. To read culture one must first have a cross-cultural viewpoint. With a cross-cultural viewpoint one recognizes that even in the United States the sub-cultures of Maryland, California, Texas, and Iowa are distinct from each other, despite commonalities. As Amos Rapaport points out: "Given a certain climate, the availability of certain materials, and the constraints and capabilities of a given level of technology, what finally decides the form of a dwelling, and moulds the spaces and their relationships, is the vision that people have of the ideal life."[5] The ability to understand this vision becomes a critical skill of the architect interested in regionalism. There are numerous writings which facilitate cultural understanding for students. For example, the work of psychologist Edward T. Hall illuminates cultural differences in spatial perception and interpersonal behavior, and J.B.Jackson is adept at reading culture as manifest in the shaping of landscape. In addition, Christopher Alexander's pattern language is an excellent tool for analyzing how people use architecture.

At this point it is fair to ask whether the kind of cultural sensitivity required is within the capability of an outsider to a culture. How successfully can an American architect practice in Saudi Arabia or how

successfully can an Arab architect practice in America? Indeed, can a New York architect practice successfully in California? It is a fact that in an age of instant communication, easy access to virtually any part of the world, and international economic markets, architects practice wherever their interests and abilities take them. Architects often simply bring their own style of building to the new context, and it must be added that local architects and clients, too, associate themselves with imported styles seen to be fashionable. The result is the all too familiar homogenization of architecture throughout the world.

On the other hand, the number of European and American architects who have been recipients of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, for example, suggests a more hopeful outcome, attainable in part through the development of a cross-cultural viewpoint. Edward W. Said, in his book *Orientalism*, summarizes the challenge: "Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals)."[6]

While Said's context of orientalism is specific, the issues are more general. The tendency to generalize and categorize in the definition of cultural characteristics can lead to a static conception of society rather than to the more factual view of a society in continual evolution. The regionalist response must be to recognize the vitality inherent in indigenous conditions and values and to enlist universal architectural ideas and personal vision in the search for regional expression. Furthermore, the tendency of professionals to generalize for convenience in problem solving can get in the way of accurate perception of and empathy with the issues involved. A cross-cultural viewpoint requires that the stance of the professional as one of assumed superiority, an attitude of "I", needs to be replaced by a more flexible and open stance, an attitude of "we".

To understand another culture one needs to understand oneself in relation to it. It is important to point out that the first condition of cultural sensitivity is an understanding of the humanistic principles embodied in culture. To this end, a broad knowledge of arts and sciences and, indeed, a broad range of life experiences are necessary. The more background a student brings to the study of architecture, the more flexible and open to multiple viewpoints will the student be.

Because architecture schools in the United States have traditionally focused students on the architectural traditions of European and North American cultures, there has been little exposure to other traditions. Indeed, even our own Western tradition has become generalized, with relatively little attention given to sub-cultures. The development of a cross-cultural point of view can be facilitated in a school of architecture through discussion and through field experiences away from school. However, the ability to "read" an environmental context is the particular analytic skill which an architecture program in regionalism should teach. Evolution of a cross-cultural attitude, analytic skills, and discussion of regionalist values and their implication for architectural design form the background for design exercises which synthesize and test ideas by application to specific cases.

As a case study, the University of Maryland School of Architecture offers a graduate degree concentration in Design for Developing Countries, the conceptual basis of which is regionalism. Three coordinated courses are the vehicle for teaching a regionalist approach to design: Seminar in Regionalism, Field Research, and Regionalism Studio. The seminar develops definitions of regionalism and critical regionalism, introduces the idea of a cross-cultural attitude, and examines architectural case studies.

Field research takes students, either individually or as a group, to a place where they will ultimately be asked to design a project. While regionalist thinking may be applied to any project anywhere, there are pedagogical advantages to taking students abroad. In an unfamiliar context students will have sharpened perceptions of the environment as well as of themselves in relation to it. Furthermore, free of the distractions of customary routines and habits, students may focus their attention in a way not possible at home. Finally, in many countries with older cultures than the United States there is a more fully developed and defined attitude toward building, which facilitates clearer understanding of the processes which brought about the shape of the environment.

Field research requirements include the documentation and analysis of urban forms, street types, building types, architectural details, and construction methods. Equally important are analyses of use patterns, private and social rituals, and non-visual sensations such as noise and smells. Furthermore, students investigate other cultural manifestations such as language, food, art and craft traditions in order to enhance their cross-cultural awareness. Personal reactions are most important, as they change over time and lead to their own special understanding of the

place. The six weeks of a typical summer program abroad is hardly enough time to become comfortable in a foreign culture, but it is enough time to begin to understand the principles guiding the creation of spaces and buildings.

The Regionalism Studio which follows field research is the context for the synthesis of regional analysis, architectural problem solving, and the personal interpretation which each student brings to the design process. On the level of urban design, understanding of the fabric of a traditional city as a two-dimensional pattern and as a system of three-dimensional spaces is a precondition for its transformation. Design proposals are made in light of concerns about transportation, economics and politics, as well as about historical continuity and social amenity. Solutions are expressed in terms of conceptual diagrams, design guidelines, and illustrative plans.

At the level of architectural design, each student inevitably has a different attitude about the organization and vocabulary of his/her building. Solutions usually include relatively literal representations of indigenous styles and contemporary interpretations of local forms, materials and details. The most ambitious projects are generally the most abstract in expression, relying upon historical principles of spatial typologies and architectural composition and upon subtle adjustments to the city and its movement patterns. Avoidance of a nostalgic or sentimental view of the past is a common goal, to be achieved in part from the necessity of dealing with the buildings in a real physical and socio-political context at scales ranging from urban design through construction details.

In conclusion, the teaching of regionalism in architecture need not be isolated in the curriculum. Regionalism is more of an approach than a discreet body of knowledge. Students can be encouraged to take part in a discussion of regionalist values and can be introduced to the necessary analytic and cross-cultural skills. The synthesis of regional characteristics, more universal architectural concepts, and personal vision will define an evolving critical regionalism which should, then, become part of the sensibility of future architects.

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