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Modern Architecture: A Critical History

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BOOK REVIEW

Modern Architecture: A Critical History, by Kenneth Frampton, Fifth edition, Thames & Hudson, 2020, 736 pp., US\$29.95 (softcover), London, UK, ISBN-10: 0500204446

The fifth edition of Kenneth Frampton's *History of Modern Architecture: A Critical History* published by Thames & Hudson (2020) establishes two essential positions: in the first place, the book introduces a different take on the historiography of architecture. In the second, but inevitably related to the first, the book demonstrates Frampton's relentless pursuit of a critical vision of history, the premises of which, I should say at the outset of this review, depart from the book's first edition, published in 1980.

This reckoning is important because only the fifth edition Frampton's introductory text does not start with a long quotation from Walter Benjamin's "The Philosophy of History" notable in the previous four editions of the book. Unlike most historians, the changes Frampton has introduced in each edition of the book correspond with the ongoing transformation in the production and consumption system of capitalism. Along with this, the reader is introduced to the work of selected architects who were conscious of architecture's ideological dependency on capitalism in modern times, which attained visibility by the late 1930s. These architects are players that come and go on the stage Frampton has set to tell the story of architecture's struggle with its interiority, and its inevitable dependency on capital, land, and construction techniques. In fact, one cannot overlook the over-presence of capitalism in architectural production and consumption; to be *critical*, one must be a modernist in the first place! Only a Benjaminian angel of history who does not fly against the wind of progress could try to save aspects of the past, the totality of which is shattered in front of her backward-looking gaze. Frampton's historiography of architecture, I posit, is an attempt to approximate the angel's gaze!

Here we should recall Frampton's most read and yet controversial essay on critical regionalism. First titled, "Prospects of a Critical Regionalism," and later "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points of an Architecture of Resistance," published in the 1983 volume of *Perspecta* and Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetics*, respectively. "Critical Regionalism" was indeed Frampton's conclusive response to the future scope of modern movement architecture. It was included in *Modern Architecture* for the first time in 1985, as "Critical Regionalism: modern architecture and cultural identity" in the last chapter of Part III of the second edition of the book. At the time, the essay seemed controversial because most readers could not see how the argument's rationale fitted within the overwhelming presence of structuralist discourse, even though they could have recognised seeds of deconstructivism if they had grasped its main argument as suggesting the impossibility of regionalism in modern times! Also that, any appeal to any form of collective "identity" should have been mapped from a historical perspective, a daunting subject in the age of global capitalism. In any event, as the scope of the 1980 edition of Part III, entitled "Critical assessment and extension into the present," 1925–78 was extended, the text lost its critical edge and was subsequently followed by "World architecture and reflective practice" (1992 edition), and so forth. My brief taxonomic notes are intended to underline Frampton's constant revision of the

historiography of architecture, recoding his critical discourse as capitalism retooled its internal contradictions. Within this paradigm, what has remained constant is Frampton's formulation of modern movement architecture, discussed in various chapters of the first two parts of the book since the 1980 edition.

The latest edition, however, confirms Frampton's position in critical regionalism as the last word as it concerns the project of modern architecture. And yet, explaining the difficulties involved in plotting the impact of modern architectural culture across the world, Frampton introduces the idea of "another deeper strand of regionalism," disclosing the selection and exclusion criteria he used for the architecture discussed in the four chapters of Part IV, under the heading "World Architecture and Modern Movement." These chapters cover the four transnational regions, Europe, the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Pacific. Here Frampton refines the scope of regionalism and the impact of the global dissemination of the capitalistic surge for modernisation. In his words, the selected work is "critically creative in itself, but also 'critical' in the sense of its fragile and unique poetic character" (368). If the critical was previously focused on the conflict between modernity and tradition, today critical praxis should instead resist the ghost of the local past (anywhere), and the global drive towards the aesthetic of commodity form. Thus, we have "a mosaic in more ways than one – an assembly of pieces that have a necessarily disjunctive and fragmentary character" (368). Like a museum curator armed with an exquisite eye, Frampton has limited his choice of buildings to those realised in the last fifty years, plus a few works from the portfolio of architects from the post-war era that for various reasons were not included in relevant chapters of previous editions. It would be a daunting task to investigate the degree to which the collection discussed in Part IV stands for the proposed deeper strand of regionalism. What should be noted here is that Frampton's redefinition of "world architecture" involves a taxonomical structure that intersects "national identity" with the aforementioned selection criteria. This is a tightrope-walking strategy, because it is hard to draw the identity-line when in most developed nations only global corporations can afford to fund the high cost of public buildings mostly designed by celebrity architects. That said, Frampton bets on the historically accumulated architectural culture in developed and less developed nations, which is most often inflicted by in-depth regional and geographic conditions, the poetics of which could offset the thrust of global spectacle.

Frampton reminds the reader of the critical importance of spectacle in an epigraph from Guy Debord's *Comments on the Society of Spectacle* (1998) at the outset of his introductory text to the fifth edition of *Modern Architecture*. For Debord, the burning issue confronting us at the dawn of the overwhelming presence of spectacle is to think about what is unthinkable. This is also what Frampton has been urging responsible architects to do ever since he penned his argument on critical regionalism. In the new edition, however, he expands the scope of his strategic call to a global scale, even though the architects most receptive to his idea of critical regionalism have most often been those working in regions with a delayed entry timeline to the capitalistic process of modernisation. Even the advancement of the Modern Movement in most Latin American countries "occurred at a slightly different time and in different initial works," writes Frampton (370). Even though there seems to be an orchestrated attempt among the heads of state of Americana to cultivate the collective dimensions of modernisation, the fact remains that people living in less advanced nations could not follow the daily life of suburban America, although they might have been using the same consumer goods produced in the States. Interestingly enough, the range of architects Frampton has chosen to highlight, from Suoto de Moura (Portugal, p. 565),

to Kamran Diba (Iran, p. 465), to Wang Shu (China, p. 547), to list just a few, speak to his awareness of the predicament of contemporary architecture worldwide. I would go further and suggest that essential to Frampton's expansive project is not exclusively the well-trodden idea of "placemaking." Rather, he wants architects, and historians, to think about and emulate *particular* interpretations of the Framptonian "six points of resistance" towards critical praxis. These points are allegorically architecture-in-itself confronting the totality that, thanks to capitalism, we take for granted as if it were a natural phenomenon.

Like the novel and most modern artistic trends, modern movement architecture was also a unique European phenomenon with a collective project that from the outset found a suitable home in the politically charged environment of non-European countries. Frampton makes this point convincingly when he briefly touches on the notion of temporality, as explored in the best historiographies of the movement. He writes:

I feel it is necessary to add that, however dated this may seem, the Modern Movement was once inseparable from the liberative modern project in the sense in which this was defined by the German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas, implying an ultimately socialist welfare state irrespective of the political ideology at a given instant in time and at a specific place.

The Modern Movement had, nevertheless, a deep structure open to various interpretations within and beyond the European continent despite the fact that "many ostensible democratic nation states are still unable to achieve a more equitable society," as Frampton notes (435). For non-western architects, the Movement was the harbinger of modernity, a non-attainable historical stage since both the Industrial and the Bolshevik Revolutions had already taken place elsewhere. These two historical events constituted the backbone of the old "internationalism," and I believe both had a profound impact on Frampton's take on critical praxis. Inspired by the collective content of these two unfoldings, Frampton is trying in this book to turn architectural ideology against itself, meaning that the *common* implied in "world architecture" offers a critical alternative to the contemporaneity of architecture subsumed by the spectacle of commodity form and disseminated worldwide in the age of digital reproducibility.

In a nutshell, the fifth edition of *Modern Architecture* is Frampton's ultimate contribution to the historiography of Modern Movement architecture! He does not see architecture's contemporaneity as another New overcoming an older one. Rather, he demonstrates the ways in which architecture still thrives though in an intensified capitalistic production and consumption system that was also essential for the formation of the Movement.

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