

Is It Rem Koolhaas vs. Critical Regionalism?

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Introduction

This paper compares the theoretical ideas of two leading protagonists in current architectural discourse. Kenneth Frampton and Rem Koolhaas appear to be in diametric opposition to each other on the issues of regional identity and creation of place in a rapidly globalizing world. Whereas Frampton has been known during the last twenty-five years as the key theoretical proponent of “critical regionalism”, Koolhaas articulately spear-heads an approach to design that Steven Moore has called “radical nihilism”¹, one altogether unconcerned with regionalism. It is a study of contrasting positions to compare their views regarding the influence of contemporary building technology and commerce on the possibility of embedding architecture in particular regional contexts. Whereas, Frampton espouses the cause of local “culture” and place under the onslaught of rampant universal “civilization” or technology and commercialism, Koolhaas accepts, even exploits, these latter as ineluctable forces delivering a species of space, subsuming a variety of contemporary building types, that is ambivalent to regional differences. In its nonchalance towards the vexed topic of regional identity, Koolhaas’ position in *Junkspace* (published in *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping*, 2002) appears to dissolve a stalemate between “culture” and “civilization” by implying that the debate is irrelevant in the first place. Here is a contribution to architectural theory that, through dealing with a spatial phenomenon that it proves to be inexorably universal, seems relevant not just to the West or the East, but to the world at large.

¹ Steven A. Moore, *Technology, Place, and the Non-modern thesis*; *Journal of Architectural Education*, February 2001, pg136.

However, an interesting question to ask is whether Koolhaas and Frampton are really as different as they appear to be at first? The views expressed in this paper are in response largely to a reading of *Junkspace* after having studied Frampton's writings on critical regionalism. The immediate impression on this author of Koolhaas' matter-of-fact cynicism in the essay was one of irreverence to the ideas that Frampton presents quite ardently in his own essays. In fact, as this paper will discuss, *Junkspace* negates in an uncannily systematic way nearly every tenet established in *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* (first published in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern Culture*, 1983). However, beyond pointing out the differences between Frampton and Koolhaas the main objective for this paper is to show that they do not necessarily have to disagree and that, however differently they may read and respond to it, they address the same problem – that of place creation in the city.

In comparing Frampton and Koolhaas, the paper first traces the development of their respective ideas over time. Next it identifies the points of difference between the essays on critical regionalism and *Junkspace*. Finally it seeks to show a commonality of purpose behind ostensibly divergent positions.

Respective Trajectories

Both Frampton and Koolhaas have developed their respective ideas over a number of years. Since 1983, when Frampton first wrote on critical regionalism – a term coined by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in their essay "The Grid and the Pathway" – he has sustained his theory through a succession of articles and essays that rely primarily on exemplification through the built works of contemporary practitioners. These articles include *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* (1983), *Prospects for a Critical Regionalism* (1983), *Universalism and/or Regionalism: Untimely Reflections on the Future of the New* (1996), and *Seven Points for the Millennium: an Untimely Manifesto* (1999). Unlike Frampton who is devoted to academia, Koolhaas straddles theory and practice; having

begun his polemics in the mid-1970's with the "retro-active" manifesto *Delirious New York*, he has led his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) in investigating a role for contemporary architecture in urbanism through theoretically based projects that range from surreal designs on paper to those actually built, all of these up till 1995 enshrined in the comprehensive *S,M,L,XL*. Since 1995 research at Harvard, specifically under the Project on the City, has yielded a series of books including *Mutations* (2001), *Guide to Shopping* (2002), and *The Great Leap Forward* (2002).

Critical regionalism and Junkspace

Critical regionalism is proposed as a strategy of resistance from local "culture" against the tyranny of global "civilization".² By civilization is meant technologies that are available internationally and that threaten, when applied in an indiscriminate manner, to homogenize city-scapes across the world. For Frampton, writing in the early 1980's the agent of this technological tyranny is economics: the efficiently produced project is the project of choice irrespective of location in the world. Mass media, advertising and consumerism that Frampton seeks to counter are defining aspects of the modern economy. One observes that insofar as the resistance is against the forces of economics, it is possible that a rear-guard action may be mounted because architects can convincingly demonstrate that the efficient solution is not always the most desired or sustainable one. For instance, it is not always difficult to show clients in hot and humid climates that glass curtain walls not only translate into huge energy losses but also are very problematic from a maintenance stand-point. However today, more than twenty-five years after the first words on critical regionalism were penned, it is increasingly plain that the advance of modernization is not only borne on the vehicle of economics but is welcomed across the globe by the

² Kenneth Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-modern*

Culture, The New Press, New York, (1998), pg 18.

embrace of culture – a force that lends itself far less to being fathomed by the architect, let alone being thwarted. In Karachi, Pakistan cost is no hurdle to the import of Hollywood films and ‘Italian’ kitchens nor is it a decisive factor in choosing between a McDonald’s fast-food restaurant and the cheaper Pakistani restaurant of the highest standard. Irrespective of economics, there is an unrelenting demand for imported objects, images and experiences in cultures across the world that brings into question the immutability of regional lifestyles.

Beyond lifestyles, the hermetic integrity of identities has also been challenged. Pakistani TV soap operas and Indian films are shot in off-shore locations to both portray and reach a diaspora that have long ago forfeited their original nationalities to gain those of the host countries. To complete the paradox, members of this diaspora continue to identify themselves with India, Pakistan, China, or Taiwan, remaining loyal especially to their ‘mother’ languages and ardently supporting their sports teams. The imagined pristine nature of regional and cultural identities becomes even more vulnerable when one reflects upon the state of communications technology today. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* Arjun Appadurai illustrates the challenge posed to national identities by “diasporic public spheres” when he writes, “As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cab-drivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers.”³ YouTube has replaced the video cassette recorder (VCR) of the 1980’s, Skype and the personalized cellular phone the neighborhood telephone, and the photo-realistic Maya rendering the hand-drawn watercolor perspective. These technological advances are indispensable fruits of universal progress that know no cultural or regional boundaries. How does critical regionalism address the Corian kitchen counter, the Alucubond façade, the Spanish porcelain floor-tile, or find a place for the dish antenna perched atop

³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pg. 4

rooftops, and the array of electronic equipment that needs air-conditioned dens insulated from the dust and humidity of the world outside? How does the need for electronic security systems in Karachi's houses allow for a seamless exchange between interior and exterior environments, nature and architecture?

Koolhaas' single contribution to Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping, Junkspace is savvy to a degree about these global changes. It is a candid though cynical admission that architecture and urbanism have capitulated to the demands of commercialization with shopping, as a major form of recreation and cultural activity, now the lifeblood for any public building. Even institutional buildings such as cultural centers, places of worship and education, and hospitals follow the logic of shopping. Where public space was previously in the open urban realm between buildings, mega-form structures now swallow this space within their cavernous interiors. Not only does shopping in the mega-form homogenize various building types, be it in Pakistan, China or Russia, it also makes public space in different cultures feel exactly the same. It is as though Koolhaas derives the second major lesson from Las Vegas where exotic environments are replicated inside single buildings one never needs to leave. Whither then is identity and place-creation? In its opening lines it dismisses the issue of identity as archaic by saying,

"Identity" is the new junk food for the dispossessed, globalization's fodder for the disenfranchised.....⁴

Therefore identity survives only where globalization either hasn't reached or has excluded. Since globalization is inexorable, it is only a matter of time before it does away completely with identity.

One is reminded of Frampton's concerns over the effect of optimized technologies when Koolhaas observes the interiorization of contemporary space,

⁴Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace, October 100, Spring 2002, pg 175

Junkspace seems an aberration, but it is the essence, the main thing.....the product of an encounter between the escalator and air-conditioning, conceived in an incubator of Sheetrock (all three missing from the history books). Continuity is the essence of Junkspace; it exploits any invention that enables expansion, deploys the infrastructure of seamlessness: escalator, air-conditioning, sprinkler, fire shutter, hot air curtain.....It is always interior, so extensive that you rarely perceive its limits; it promotes disorientation by any means (mirror, polish, echo).....Junkspace is sealed, held together not by structure but by skin, like a bubble.⁵

In a single fell swoop Junkspace gainsays all that critical regionalism stands for: tactility, tectonics, the refusal of sealed, never-ending, air-conditioned environments impervious to natural ventilation and light. And where there is no memory, can there be place? Koolhaas writes,

Junkspace cannot be remembered. It is flamboyant yet unmemorable, like a screen-saver; its refusal to freeze ensures instant amnesia. Junkspace does not pretend to create perfection, only interest. Its geometries are unimaginable, only makeable⁶.

Finally, the admission is explicitly made,

Because of its tenuous viability, Junkspace has to swallow more and more program to survive; soon we will be able to do anything anywhere. We will have conquered place.

In this observation one can infer that “place” is equated with the urban realm. Uniform, controlled interiority allows us to escape exterior conditions and realities that differentiate places from one another. When place is rendered irrelevant, questions of identity can also be ignored. Throughout the

⁵ Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace, October 100, Spring 2002, pg 175-176

⁶ Rem Koolhaas, Junkspace, October 100, Spring 2002, pg 177

essay the tone is one of unmitigated cynicism yet it can also be inferred that Koolhaas accepts the dominance and pervasiveness of junkspace.

Critical regionalism's Urban Assignment

For Frampton, critical regionalism is about the creation of specific place beyond a modernist notion of homogeneous, universal space. He implies unequivocally in the first few pages of *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* that the loss of a sense of place is today most palpable in city centers where historic city fabrics have been overrun by rampant commercialization. To this effect he writes:

“Modern building is now so universally conditioned by optimized technology that the possibility of creating significant urban form has become extremely limited. The restrictions jointly imposed by automotive distribution and the volatile play of land speculation serve to limit the scope of urban design to such a degree that any intervention tends to be reduced either to the manipulation of elements predetermined by the imperatives of production, or to a kind of superficial masking which modern development requires for the facilitation of marketing and the maintenance of social control.”⁷

Therefore, critical regionalism as Frampton explains must address problems that are essentially urban in nature: the place that architecture must create is the place of the city. Despite the pastoral, removed nature of much of his ensuing case studies, Frampton sets up the brunt of critical regionalism's assignment as being located in urban contexts where the forces of homogenizing “civilization” are most potently visited upon “locally inflected culture”. In comparing Frampton with Koolhaas, this fundamentally urban nature of the problem is a very significant point to consider for at least two reasons. First, it shows that Koolhaas' objectives may not be at complete odds with those of critical

⁷ Kenneth Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance* in "Labour, Work and Architecture: The Collected Essays on Architecture and Design", Phaidon Press Ltd. London, (2002), pg 17

regionalism, and second it establishes a basic criterion against which is measured who is closer to addressing issues of place and identity.

If the frontlines for the struggle to create place and identity lie in the city, then Koolhaas joins battle more convincingly than Frampton. This is because, whereas Frampton abandons his initial focus on the city while resorting to exemplification of his theory at the architectural scale, Koolhaas never loses sight of the city for the building. Unlike Frampton's essays that deal with the individual buildings of Alvaro Siza, Tadao Ando, and Mario Botta, S,M,L,XL and OMA's work is an exploration across scales encompassing villas as well as landscape projects and city master-plans. His first book *Delirious New York* more than anything else analyses a special urban condition that contemporary architecture helps create. Koolhaas is nothing if not acutely aware and concerned about the urban realm, tracking its mutations tirelessly. He backs his arguments with statistics,

"in 2025 the number of city-dwellers could reach 5 billion individuals.....of the 33 megalopolises predicted in 2015, 27 will be located in the least developed countries, including 19 in Asia.....Tokyo will be the only rich city to figure in the list of the 10 largest cities."⁸

Granted that Frampton writes in times less turbulent globally, this observation is a telling index of the discrepancy between Frampton's view of the urban problem and Koolhaas'. The numbers mentioned above deal with a part of the world that Frampton's essays altogether ignore. Whereas his essays cite the work of Alvaro Siza in Portugal, Tadao Ando in Japan, and Mario Botta in the Ticino area of Switzerland, Koolhaas in the *Project on the City* explores previously uncharted territory. By researching the Middle East, Africa and China, Koolhaas addresses regions that are some of the hardest pressed to retain their identities in the face of globalization.

⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Future City*; *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003, pg.1.

The agenda of the books resulting from the Harvard Project on the City, far from being exclusively architectural, is as Frederic Jameson has noted best described as cultural study. These books seek to understand and illustrate how contemporary cities are changing under the vagaries of technology, commerce, and politics. This approach to comprehending cultures is significant in discussing Frampton's rendition of critical regionalism as somewhat a top-down approach to place-creation. One infers from his essays that the architect, as master form-giver, determines the creation of place and identity in the built environment. This is especially contradictory to the theory's pluralistic tenor that would suggest mitigating a modernist reverence for the individual creator. Instead, by analyzing cultural phenomena that are beyond the control of single actors and are fundamental determinants of the environment at large, Koolhaas is interested in a more bottom-up system for design.

Frampton and Koolhaas observe the same phenomena but their intellectual responses to them are contrasting. Both acknowledge the skyscraper and freeway as prime catalysts in the changing urban environment of modern times. However, while Frampton is concerned about the loss of city-center fabrics to offices that are essentially post-modern, Koolhaas celebrates the ordered heterogeneity of a place like Manhattan as a new kind of urbanity that has huge architectural potential. In an illustration (done in collaboration with Madelon Vriesendorp and Elia Zenghelis) for *Delirious New York*, he sees the Cartesian grid as providing the datum within which architecture is free to express itself as an enclave self-contained spatially, formally, and conceptually. Indeed one can read this paradox as a defining characteristic of Manhattan's identity as a place. The implications then for critical regionalism are significant because, unlike Frampton's use of the single project as a localized entity to reflect the region, a strongly identifiable place is created at the scale of the city.

Despite ostensibly divergent positions on identity and place, Koolhaas and Frampton have recently come to share similar views on a number of issues. Whereas Koolhaas' ideas on these issues originate as early

as 1989 in an essay *Toward the Contemporary City*, Frampton echoes these ideas in his 1999 keynote address at the Twentieth Congress of the UIA in Beijing. Proposed as solutions to the heterogeneous urban conditions rife in contemporary cities, these are mega-form and landscape.

Mega-form: Both Frampton and Koolhaas view the mega-form as having a potential to create the kind of differentiation in the repetitive modern cityscape that the historic core previously did. Although Koolhaas points to the promise of bigness as early as the mid-70's with the embryonic *Delirious New York: a Retroactive Manifesto*, it is perhaps more interesting to note the development of Frampton's views on mega-form. In his first writings on critical regionalism during the early 80's, Frampton illustrates the theory with projects that are all small to medium scale, non-commercial, and mostly situated outside city centers, even in pastoral contexts. By 1999, in *Seven Points for the Millennium: An Untimely Manifesto*, he offers the mega-form (carefully distinguishing it from the mega-structure of the 1960's) as a civic microcosm in contemporary times. Indeed, the building types he suggests as mega-form interventions are all embedded within the city, large scale and all the ones Koolhaas no doubt has in mind when writing *Junkspace*.

Landscape urbanism

Both Frampton and Koolhaas are in almost perfect agreement in their espousal of landscape urbanism as a redemptive strategy for contemporary urban conditions. Albeit they express them differently, both furnish basically the same two reasons for proposing such a strategy⁹:

1. Formal control: being inherently close to the horizontal ground and often serving as a connective tissue, landscape is less obtrusive than buildings that are today increasingly juxtaposed against one another.

⁹ Rem Koolhaas, *Towards the Contemporary City in Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, Kate Nesbitt ed., Princeton Architectural Press, New York (1996).

2. Social Acceptability: landscapes as open public realms are less socially controversial than buildings that allow some people in while excluding others.

Conclusion

In *Junkspace* we see a Koolhaas who is cynical of all the aspirations of critical regionalism. Yet, just like it is Frampton's basic objective to resist the homogenizing of cities worldwide, it is Koolhaas' aim to define a role for architecture in the context of dynamically evolving contemporary cities. Both are concerned with the possibility of creating place in the urban realm. Judging from the subjects of their researches and ideas, Koolhaas' commitment to this urban realm is however stronger than Frampton's.

Scale, location, and agency become important differences between the two. Frampton illustrates his theory through small to medium scale projects of private or institutional programs situated outside demanding urban settings. He offers as examples Ando's Koshino House and civic buildings such as Aalto's Saynatsalo town hall and Utzon's Bagsvaerd Church that would resist commercial demands better than high-rise office towers or shopping centers. Koolhaas, on the other hand, engages a wide variety of clients ranging from the Chinese government to Prada, building boutique stores and designing master-plans in the midst of major metropolises. His theoretical efforts have consistently taken the city as their main subject.

Koolhaas' geographical survey is more comprehensive than Frampton's, engaging developing regions in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia that are face the most intense challenges to their identities from globalization. The study is also comprehensive, and more fundamental, in another way: by seeking to understand cultural phenomena it focuses on a level of influence more basic than buildings or urban design.

Finally, Koolhaas points to the possibility of identity and place creation at the scale of the city. Delirious New York provides the example of Manhattan as a distinct place defined by the juxtaposition within an orthogonal grid of architectural objects and experiences. This goes beyond the locus of individual buildings that try to evoke the place of their confined sites.

Rem Koolhaas' theoretical explorations challenge but also extend and refocus critical regionalism. By emphasizing the city the original problem is highlighted while the concept of region is broadened by acknowledging factors that are changing its definition.

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