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# TEN POINTS ON AN ARCHITECTURE OF REGIONALISM: A PROVISIONAL POLEMIC

By Kenneth Frampton

## INTRODUCTION

One could hardly describe the present moment in architecture as anything less than a period of rapid change. Toffler's famous *Future Shock* has some relevance in this regard, particularly where he demonstrates the symptomatic escalating rate of change in the field of art from 1870 to the present. One way of achieving some clarity in a volatile period such as this is to construct a provisional model with which to establish the boundaries of the field. I am reminded at this juncture of Aldo van Eyck, who, by way of attempting to delimit the problem, wrote some years ago:

Architects nowadays are pathologically addicted to change, regarded as something one either hinders, runs after or at best keeps up with. This, I suggest, is why they tend to sever the past from the future, with the result that the present is rendered emotionally inaccessible, without temporal dimension. I dislike a sentimental antiquarian attitude towards the past as much as I dislike a sentimental technocratic one towards the future. Both are founded on a static, clockwork notion of time (what antiquarians and technocrats have in common), so let's start with the past for a change and discover the unchanging condition of man.

Van Eyck's trans-historical, almost archaic, existential attitude implies a willingness to confront, in a critical sense, the myths and realities of the present situation. And this he continues to do despite the irrevocable global changes introduced in the past 40 years: above all fundamental and general transformations in the fields of production, distribution, and information. As far as architecture is concerned, there seems to be little chance today that large-scale undertakings will yield works of cultural significance. This is partly due to fundamental changes in the methods of financing. I am alluding to the direct line that exists today between surplus insurance capital and various forms of transcontinental and intercontinental development. The vast size of these works tends to create an overall drive towards optimization, that is, towards the reduction of building to the maximizing of economic criteria and to the adoption of normative plans and construction methods reducing architecture to the provision of an aesthetic skin—the packaging, in fact, of nothing more than

a large commodity in order to facilitate its marketing. This means that the scope of activity available to the potential "regionalist" is *interstitial* rather than *global* in nature, which may be seen by some as a decided advantage. The overdetermined, let us say predetermined, nature of the global condition may be construed from an interview with a senior partner in a large American corporate practice. He concluded on a sobering note, tinged with a certain complacency. "Let's face it," he remarked, "this is a hungry machine."

While the hyperconsumptive drives of our hypertechological civilization have yet to run themselves into the ground, the era of the historical *avant-garde* seems to be over. We are confronted with the paradoxical situation in which, while modernization continues with unabated voracity at every conceivable technical and structural level, the romance of discovery and invention has lost its popular appeal. Progress is hardly a credible myth in this period of history. The heroics of Lindbergh have been replaced by the hysterics of Rambo, and this substitution indicates a fundamental change in the received conception of our manifest destiny. The failure of the first moon walk to capture the public's imagination bewildered the authorities, and there has been a tendency of late to sustain the idea of progress by such fallacious and dangerous devices as old-style xenophobia and imperialism—and even a return to early capitalism—rather than maintaining a social-democratic welfare state. The deliberate deconstruction of the New Deal, both here and elsewhere, reduces the scope of architecture. It renders it incapable of contributing in a significant way to the public values of the society.

Among the disturbing structural changes taking place is the ever-expanding power of the multinational corporations; we should not deceive ourselves for a moment as to the relative indifference of these conglomerates to the welfare of the society in which they happen to be based. Under their hegemony, patriotism is transformed into an absurdity and regional differentiation is a factor to be eliminated. What they value most is a universal, undifferentiated abacus upon which the ebb and flow of value-free exchange and profit can be facilitated and maintained. Such issues may appear to be remote from the immediate practice of architecture, but massive material and psycho-societal changes such as these have a wide impact. With such changes, as Marx was to put it, "All that is solid melts into air."

The monopolization of the profession and the building

industry and the consolidation of transcontinental capital have totally transformed the ground rules underlying large-scale building today. The philosopher Jurgen Habermas is right when he argues that neo-conservatism wishes to mask the true causes for the wide-ranging, sometimes unconscious, societal discontent brought into being by the ever-accelerating cycle of modernization and change. As he puts it, this discontent and friction were not brought into being by modernist intellectuals. This is all too evident in England, where the latest cycle of modernization from above has led to a more or less permanent population of four million unemployed. One can hardly take cultural eggheads to task for changes of this magnitude, and no one is capable of foreseeing the social and psychological consequences of such a massive decentering of a large sector of the population.

Meanwhile, from a cultural point of view, we are confronted with a situation in which everything seems to have already happened. Everything is touched by a sense of being past; even the most super-heated reinterpretations of *avant-gardist* schemes can hardly escape this underlying sense of *deja-vu*. Even the so-called "high-tech" products of our all-too-recent past become rapidly amortized and tarnished in more ways than one. Norman Foster's brilliant but nonetheless absurdly rhetorical and expensive Hongkong and Shanghai Bank is a case in point—the skyscraper as Cape Canaveral! Whether we like it or not, we are confronted everywhere by the uncanny aging of the "new," first remarked on by Theodor Adorno in relation to the development of modern music.

The history of the last three centuries, when blithely appropriated by the so-called Post-Modern, becomes at once equally jaded. And, notwithstanding the conservative appeal of returning to tradition, one has the sense that the rich seams of our cultural heritage will soon be exhausted, burnt out, particularly when a cannibalized lexicon of eclectic historical references, freely mixed with modernist fragments and formalist banalities, serves as the superficial gilt with which to market architecture, to situate it finally as one more item within an endless field of free-floating commodities and images. Beneath this ever-changing gingerbread charade, we know that the plans and volumetric arrangements of the so-called International Style remain essentially unchanged. The optimizing neo-Miesian planning procedures are fundamentally the same; only the revetment has been transformed to evoke, let us say, the lost glories of Louis XV, or the institu-

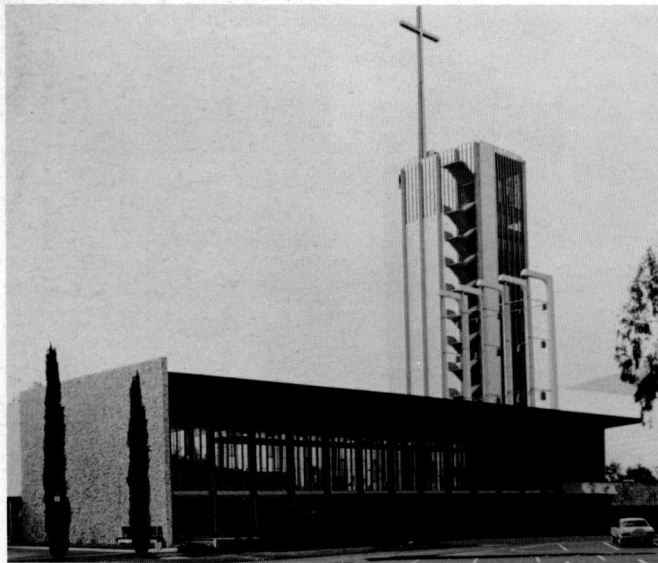
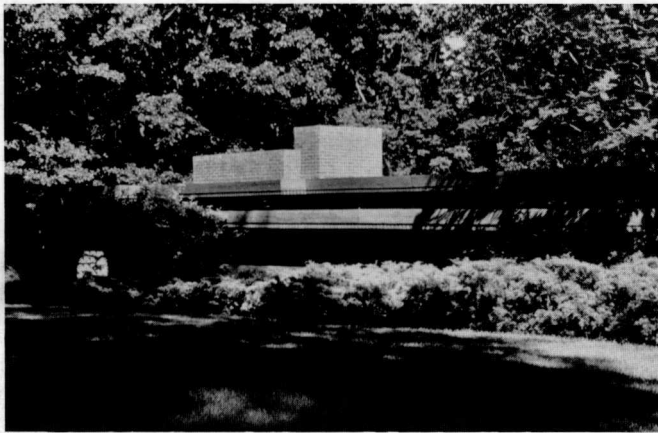
tional monumentality of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts or the romance of the *moderne* as embodied in our recent nostalgia for the Art Deco—Helmut Jahn's so-called "populist modernism", of which one might say (the first time as a poetic if vulgar evocation and the second time as an opportunistic allusion) it is the simulation of a simulation. Is this not the difference between America's representing itself as a lost Eldorado in the euphoria of the Twenties and its trying to recapture the time when it truly possessed the innocence and luxury of being a frontier?

What scope still remains, then, for an architecture of dissent, for some other mode of building, not entirely predetermined by forces beyond our control? How may we regroup the practice of our admittedly marginal discipline without blindly reiterating a modern syntax, deprived of its original subversive and poetic energy, or without lapsing into an endless proliferation of kitsch historicism devoid of all relevance and sense? Is there, in fact, a middle ground left for another kind of practice, however marginal? What then of the apparent promise of regionalism and what can we possibly mean by the evocation of this term?



Frank Lloyd Wright, *Smith House, Oak Park, Illinois, 1898.*  
Richard Neutra, *Community Church, Garden Grove, California, 1962.*

In response to this question I would like to proffer something one might call a “speculative manifesto” organized around ten points. These points obviously open to a series of issues that require extensive debate, and surely this is necessary, since only through such questioning will we ever arrive at any kind of reliable “ground” upon which a significant, if marginal, practice of architecture might still be pursued.



#### POINT 1: CRITICAL REGIONALISM AND VERNACULAR FORM

Regionalism should not be sentimentally identified with the vernacular. 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. Adolf Loos surely had the last aphoristic word in this regard more than 70 years ago when he wrote: “The peasant builds a roof. Is it a beautiful roof or an ugly roof? He doesn’t know—it is the roof. It is the roof as his father, grandfather and great grandfather had built the roof before him.” In other words, the roof and hence the vernacular lies beyond any kind of evaluation in terms of bourgeois aesthetics. In fact, one of the problems with the term regionalism arises out of the affix *ism* since this patently implies the postulation of a style, that is, of a received set of aesthetic preferences. Critical regionalism should, in my view, lie beyond style. It should devote itself in the last analysis to establishment of bounded domains and tactile presences with which to resist the dissolution of the late-modern world.

#### POINT 2: THE MODERN MOVEMENT

There remains a solid and liberative heritage lying within the complex culture that we generally subsume under the term the Modern Movement. It is nothing short of reactionary folly to abandon the liberative, critical, and poetic traditions of this century on the ground of *retarditaire* fashion. The Usonian Houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, to cite but a single example, are a case in point. They represent the last serious attempt made in this country (or anywhere else for that matter) to render the suburbs as a place of a liberative universal middle-class culture, as a place of cultivation that would be liberating not only for men, but also for women. To continue to ignore the breadth and relevance of Wright’s work in this regard is surely one more symptom of our pathological philistinism. What he realized in over 200 houses built for the state of Usonia should be rallied to as a point of departure rather than dismissed as a dead end, and I have in mind here the total scope of Wright’s Usonian achievement from the smallest detail to the sensitivity, economy, and ingenuity of his basic volumetric arrangements.

It is of the utmost significance that Wright anchored his Usonian houses into the ground—that he posited a pattern



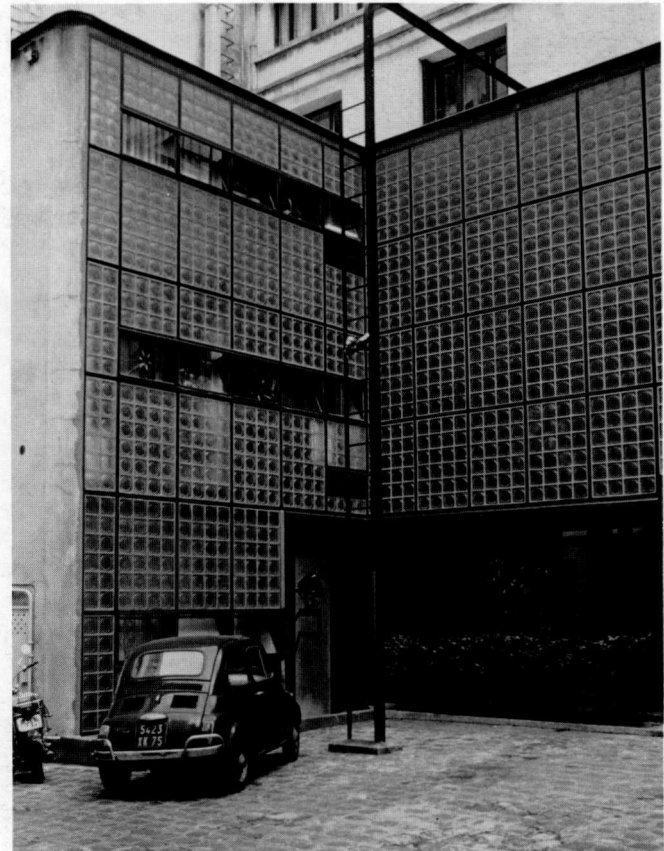
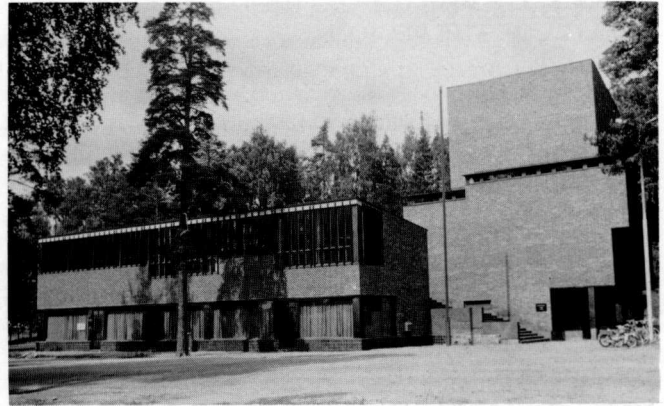
Luis Barragan, *Gilardi House, Tacubaya, Mexico City, 1976.*

Alvar Aalto, *Town Hall, Saynatsalo, Finland, 1950-52.*

Pierre Chareau, *Dalsace House (Maison de Verre), Paris, 1931.*

of land settlement far removed from the endless proliferation of free-standing objects to which we are, as a society, so pathetically addicted. It is stupefying how we remain so utterly incapable of restricting the rate at which we consume land. The American suburb built since the end of the second world war is surely the prelude to the apocalypse.

These are patently political questions. They are also questions that are rarely discussed in terms of what kind of a future we really envisage for our liberal democracy. Architecture is culture politics. This fact is relevant with respect to any judgment we may make as to the heritage of the Modern Movement for, apart from its reductive functionalism, its cultural legacy remains infinitely rich, and other examples apart from Wright may be cited in this regard. Let me remind you in passing of Richard Neutra, of Eileen Gray, of Alvar Aalto, of Pierre Chareau, of De la Sota, of Jorn Utzon, of Peter Selsing, or Raphael Soriano, of Luis Barragan, of H. H. Harris, of J. L. Coderch, of the little-known Austrian architect Roland Rainer, all of whom have achieved works of delicate sensitivity and critical relevance in the course of the last 50 years.



### POINT 3: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY OF THE REGION

Critical regionalism begs the question as to what are the true limits of a region and what is its institutional status. It would be foolishly restrictive if we conceived of region *only* in terms of locality and climate, etc., although these factors are surely critical to the constitution and expressivity of local form. However, two interrelated factors are of ultimate importance when we consider the idea of region from an institutional standpoint.

The first of these may be subsumed under the notion of discourse; the second addresses itself to the cultivation of the client in a profound sense. By discourse I mean first and foremost the coming into being of a “school” of local culture, although my use of the term “school” has wider connotations as well. Nonetheless, this idea returns us to the critical importance of the architectural school as a pedagogical *and* cultural institution. By client, I intend only to remind you of the obvious—namely, that a culturally significant work can hardly be achieved without a committed client.

I have alluded to the negative conditions of our time, to superannuated notions of inevitable progress that are as destructive as they are fallacious. In this regard I would like to suggest that critically resistant “regions,” like “schools,” have to be created. They are, in this sense, necessary myths, as any self-consciously created culture must be. Far from being merely an illusion, a myth can become a critical and creative force. As Rainer Maria Rilke put it, “It wasn’t but they feed it with a feeling that it might exist and this was of such strength it did confer one horn which grew and came up to a Virgin once all white and was within the mirror and in her.”

Innumerable examples of consciously evoked subcultures may be drawn from the distant and recent past, from the recent Ticinese school of Mario Botta *et al.* to the chain Palladian architecture of the Veneto region; from Wright’s Prairie Style to the second Southern Californian School of Gregory Ain, J. R. Davidson, H. H. Harris, and Raphael Soriano; from the long history of the architectural school in Porto of which Alvaro Siza is the most prominent representative to the young California minimalist-constructivists of today. As I have remarked elsewhere, Harwell Hamilton Harris touched on this, now over 30 years ago, when at the Northwest regional committee meeting of the AIA in Eugene, Oregon, he spoke of *restrictive* versus *liberative* regionalism. He seems to have seen the East Coast Bauhaus Modernism and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts as but two equally restrictive manifestations, as opposed to the liberative regionalism of the Southern Californian school of Wright, which took the forms of European rationalism and constructivism and passed them through filters which had already been laid in place in Los Angeles by Irving Gill and Greene & Greene.



### POINT 4: INFORMATION AND EXPERIENCE

In all this it is important to bear in mind that the media are double-edged and that from the point of achieving a sensitive critical practice, they often function as a negative influence. Granted, we are better informed than ever before, not to say over- and even mis-informed, and the “noise” level, to which this paper may be one more contribution, is deafening. It is as though the ever-increasing barbarism of our architecture is to be compensated for by our seemingly endless proclivity for debate and by our obsession with history and the past. It is as though the endless proliferation of books documenting past glories—including the golden age of the *avant garde*—helps to compensate for our rapacious, techno-scientific, commodification of the environment.

In general, we have begun to lose our capacity for distinguishing between information and experience, not only in architecture, but in everything else as well. Reality and irreality are deliberately confused and fused together. We oscillate between the soap opera and world destruction. We are switched, whether we like it or not, between the blandish-

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ments of the commercial and the irreality of terrorism. We are inclined, even urged, to take the representation for the real thing and vice versa. So much for television which, as a recent architectural series has demonstrated, is an ambiguous if not an unsuitable medium with which to convey the experience of architecture—the endlessly panning camera and the placement of the tactile into the “inaccessible” middle ground. As Kenneth Clark put it in one of his more felicitous moments: “I am standing in front of Chartres Cathedral, which you can’t see because I am standing in front of it.” Surely in this he was close to having the last word about the fundamental antipathy that obtains between tourism, photography, film, and architecture. As to the delusions of tourism, Abraham Moles was surely correct when he opined that “the monuments of Europe are being worn out by Kodaks.” And have we not witnessed and are we not still witnessing what a journalist once called “the death of the postcard,” when totally fictitious recreations of *genius loci*, close in spirit to rock video, begin to replace the former 19th-century link between photography and the monument?

One thinks of the universal international hotel in which all differences are to be perceived in such a way as they no longer make a difference. Let us take the case of the Wrightian Arizona-Phoenix Hotel which now belongs to the Biltmore chain and is treated as if it were just simply one more hotel, one more garden complex, one more pool, one more buffet, filled with beautiful people.

I dwell on the media because of the extent to which we are conditioned by them, consciously or otherwise, so much so that we often read buildings as picturesque images of structures, rather than opening ourselves to a direct experience of their corporeal form.

#### POINT 5: SPACE/PLACE

This opposition has been most clearly formulated by Martin Heidegger in his seminal essay of 1954, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” in which he opposed the Latin *spatium in extensio*, or regularly subdivided, theoretically infinite space, to the Teutonic concept of *Raum* as a phenomenologically bounded clearing or domain. For Heidegger the boundary is not the line at which something stops, but rather the contour within which something begins its “presencing.” As opposed to this, modern urban development has favored the proliferation of a universal, privatized, placeless domain. I am referring to the universal phenomenon of the Megalopolis, which was first enthusiastically recognized as such by the French geographer Jean Gottman. He saw it as the characteristic pattern of urban development throughout the Northeastern seaboard of the United States and elsewhere. And it was this same phenomenon that led the planner Melvin Webber to coin such terms as “community without propinquity” or

“non-place urban realm” as slogans with which to rationalize the total loss of the civic domain in modern society.

#### POINT 6: TYPOLOGY/TOPOGRAPHY

Typology is a term that pertains to both civilization and culture. It is clear, for instance, that the building types of the Enlightenment—that is, the types initially propagated by the Ecole Polytechnic and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts—were relatively universal. They were gridded, rational matrices, capable of admitting a wide range of institutional programs and were applicable to almost any regular site. As opposed to this, the received types of the Arts and Crafts movement were culturally grounded in the real and/or mythic history of a particular place. They were convoluted, additive, and programmatically specific. Nonetheless, these types were typifiable and as the essence of the vernacular they were culturally handed down. Topography, on the other hand, is unequivocally site-specific. It is, so to speak, the concrete appearance of rootedness itself. Nature, even the manipulated man-made nature, is the precondition for its being.

This opposition between typology and topography is potentially manifest at every level, from the integration of a new intervention with the existing environment to the ecological, climatological, and symbolic aspects of the resultant *place-form*. This unavoidable transformation of a given topographic context in every building act is only suppressed where maximizing criteria of either an instrumental or an aesthetic nature are superimposed, such as the ruthless leveling of the contours in a typical American subdivision or, alternatively, the conception of the building as a freestanding aesthetic object from the outset. It is necessary to state that high-rise constructions tend to become disjunctive in this regard, although one may still relate such works to existing topographic features or, alternatively, to other high-rise structures.

#### POINT 7: ARCHITECTONIC/SCENOGRAPHIC

The term “architectonic” and, more specifically, the Greek word *tekton* allude etymologically to the *metier* of the carpenter and therefore not only to the maker of the primitive Greek temple but also to the primordial role of the frame and the joint in the genesis of construction. It is hardly necessary to add that the term “architect” itself derives from the term *architekton*, meaning chief constructor. Thus, the generic term “architectonic” refers not only to the technical means of supporting the building but also to the mythic reality of this structural achievement; that is, it should display the way in which the artifice interacts with nature, not only in terms of gravity, but also in terms of its durability with regard to the agencies of climate and time. This applies to architec-



tonic forms, irrespective of whether the element is a frame and hence strictly *tectonic* or whether it is made of load-bearing mass construction and hence *stereotomic*.

Scenography, on the other hand, comes from the Latin word *scena* and from *frons scenae*, meaning scene, and is thus essentially representational in nature. It may be argued that the architectonic and the scenographic have always had quite different affinities, the one arising out of aboriginal building, the other being essentially identified with the Renaissance.

In this context, we can easily see how the current tendency to reduce built form to images or scenography only serves to further an imagistic *reception* and *perception* of the built form. As Marco Frascari reminds us, the suppression of construction through the elimination of framework or the masking of the joints deprives architecture of its expressiveness, so that the architectonic significance of the work becomes obfuscated and mute. As Frascari puts it, the act of *construing*—interpreting—presupposes, as its etymology would indicate, the act of *constructing* in the first place.

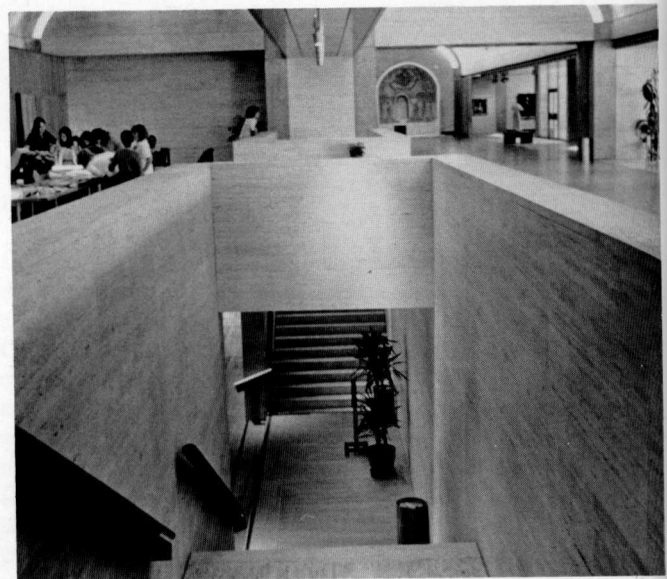
#### POINT 8: ARTIFICIAL/NATURAL

More than any other art form, building and architecture have an interactive relationship with nature. Nature is not only topography and site, but also climate and light to which architecture is ultimately responsive to a far greater degree than any other art. Built form is necessarily susceptible to an intense interaction with these elements and with time, in its cyclical aspects.

All of this seems so self-evident as to hardly require stating, and yet we tend to forget how universal technology in the form of modern mechanical services (air conditioning, artificial light, etc.) tends towards the elimination of precisely those features that would otherwise relate the outer membrane of a given fabric to a particular place and a specific culture. Something similar may be claimed for the provision of natural light in relation to diurnal and seasonal change. This point is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated in the case of the totally closed, climatically controlled art gallery. It is well-known that ultra-violet light has a deleterious effect on certain forms of art, but between the filtration and reflection of *direct* natural light and its total exclusion there still remains a certain scope for modulation and control. Louis Kahn's Kimbell Museum aptly demonstrates how natural lighting levels below a certain safe level may be amply and subtly

boosted with artificial spotlighting. Without such a mediated approach, the exclusion of natural light deprives art, in experiential terms, of any form of interaction with the place.

One needs to mention in this regard the equally negative impact of optimized services. I am alluding not only to excessive energy consumption and the heavy pollution that results, but also to the way in which hermetically-sealed, air-conditioned structures are incapable of responding to variations in the outside climate. Once again, built form tends to be deprived of its inherently mediatory capacity, such as the provision of natural shade, the admission of natural ventilation, and even the neutralization of seasonal extremes through changes in spatial occupation. Who has not experienced the perversity of being unable to open a window during temperate weather in an air-conditioned, hermetically sealed environment? To this must be added the technological indifference of air-conditioned structures to the climatological benefits that accrue to certain forms of layout rather than others. I am thinking of the “climatological-flywheel” effect that is induced by the provision of enclosed courts—warmer in winter, cooler in summer. Rather than being an anti-air-conditioning polemic, this approach indicates the need for balancing the techniques of universal civilization with the



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rooted forms of climatically inflected culture.

#### POINT 9: VISUAL/TACTILE

These alternatives address the way in which the architectural object is open to levels of perception other than the visual. Architecture possesses a marked capacity for being experienced by the entire sensorium; that is to say, senses other than the optic nerve are involved in experiencing architecture. Under most circumstances, materials and surfaces can be as much a part of an overall perception of architecture as the presence of visual form. Air movement, acoustics, ambient temperature and smell—all these factors affect our experience of space.

It is a common experience to become suddenly aware of the rake of a stair and the rhythm that this involuntarily imposes on our sense of well-being. Some tread-to-riser relationships will be found awkward and others gracious, thereby affecting the sense of poise experienced by the body. If we include in this percept the materials from which the stair is surfaced, then clearly the overall experience will be a combination of both the surface finish and the going. Such experiences are particularly expressive of hierarchical spatial episodes. A typical example is the architectural promenade created by Alvar Aalto in the sequential approach to the council chamber of Saynatsalo City Hall (1952).

Numerous other examples of the tactile perception of space could be given, from Lucio Visconti's insistence on solid wood-block flooring in the Altona Mansion in which he filmed "The Damned" (in order that the actors would be able to assume appropriate postures) to the attention that Jorn Utzon drew in 1962 to cultural differentiations stemming from different forms of "undercroft;" from, say, the suspended timber platform generic to the architecture of the Orient to the solid masonry plateaux that are commonly found in Mesoamerica. Suffice it to say that, in each instance, the biological privilege accorded to sight is complemented by strong tactile experiences. What is implied by these examples is the contrary, that is to say, the stress placed upon *rationalized sight* in the evolution of Renaissance architecture, i.e., perspective. After the 15th century, the triumphant legacy of this intellectual construct would exercise a strong hold over the development of Western space. At its most reductive, this mode of perception tends to place undue stress on the *formal representation*. This is often achieved, in our time, at the ex-

pense of tactility. Here, once again, one looks for a certain complementarity between the two poles, for a critique of the visual in terms of the tactile, and vice-versa. The implication here is that the being as a whole has a greater capacity to resist than the "short circuit," so to speak, connecting visual stimuli to information rather than experience.

#### POINT 10: POST-MODERNISM AND REGIONALISM: A SUMMATION

The protagonists of Post-Modernity—that is to say, those who are convinced that the heroic period of the Modern Movement has come to an end—seem to fall into two groups: the Neo-Historicists and the Neo-Avant-Gardists. The first, who seem to be the more prominent in the eyes of the popular press, are those who feel that the entire apparatus of the *avant-garde* has been discredited and that no choice remains but to abandon this ostensibly radical discourse and to return to tradition. The second, while repudiating global utopias, seem to welcome nonetheless the continuing escalation of modernization as an inevitable process. They see this process positively as one which, despite its predominantly technical character, contains within its nature the liberative and "creative" forms of the future. Of the two groups it may be claimed that the second is the more realistic and consistent in that modernization continues in any case. The former, on the other hand, is culturally schizophrenic and politically retrogressive, for it too remains secretly committed to the benefits of universal civilization. Where the Neo-Historicists are *anti-modern* in every respect, the Neo-Avant-Gardists are perhaps more strictly *Post-Modern* in that by repudiating the utopian legacy of the Enlightenment they proclaim the end of "master narratives" in all fields, including that of science itself.

Regionalism, in my view, constitutes the potential, interstitial middle ground between these two irreconcilable "Post-Modern" positions. It is as critical of the one as it is of the other and while it may as a theoretical position be as full of *aporias* as the other two, it does nonetheless offer a critical basis from which to evolve a contemporary architecture of resistance—that is, a culture of dissent free from fashionable stylistic conventions, an architecture of place rather than space, and a way of building sensitive to the viscissitudes of time and climate. Above all, it is a concept of the environment where the body as a whole is seen as being essential to the manner in which it is experienced.