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## The USA: the image of our future. Aren't they?

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### Abstract

This article ponders on the role of the United States as the reference point and the model of modern capitalist, consumerist and global culture, anticipating not only what is to come, but also what is already happening, on the rest of the planet. However, very much aware of the cultural problems worldwide – if that model was to be really globally available – in order to contrast such a global and indifferent escalation, it is to be recognised that the phenomenon of Critical Regionalism potentially has the power to contrast the indiscriminate consumption of natural resources and the annihilation of cultural diversity with the various nations of the world.

### Keywords

Critical Regionalism — Smart City — Vincent Scully — Peter Blake  
Arthur Drexler — Bruno Zevi

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Das industriell entwickeltere Land zeigt dem minder entwickelten nur das Bild der eignen Zukunft!. (Marx 1867)

The epoch of consumption in which we live, characterized by the globalisation, by the tearing down of life's certainties and by the fickleness our existence, more and more hectic and forced to keeping up with the inclination of the group to avoid feeling out of place or outright excluded, is well described by Zygmunt Bauman, in the *Liquid modernity* (2000), and it recalls what a few years previous Jean-François Lyotard recognized as the postmodern condition (1979). In both cases the most relevant aspect of it all is the impossibility to pinpoint a center of reference.

Contrary to that though, more recently, Richard Florida (2003), stated that, nowadays, there are many centers of reference in correspondence with those places able to attract, stimulate and encourage new and thriving generations of creative people. Oddly as it may seem, that article points at the United States of America – the best of possible worlds – as the reference point and as the model for a global, capitalist and consumerist culture which, as it is, will most certainly anticipate what is happening and what is to come on the planet, reminding us what Karl Marx stated at the end of the nineteenth century: «The country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed, the image of its own future» (Marx 1867, Foreword).

The United States, as the Western cultural model of reference par excellence, found some sort of convalidation in the history of the Millennium just closed. As Stephen Gundle and Marco Guani wrote (1989), we need to consider that

no other country in the twenty-first century has been able to compete with such increasing influence and with the ascendancy that the US has had on the contemporary world. It can be argued that the apex of the American political and military power was reached in 1945, when the exclusive possession of the nuclear bomb, the military success and an extraordinary economic and financial power gave rise to an unprecedented global hegemony; for other aspect, on the other hand, the importance of the United States in the Western world is probably more relevant today than it was forty years ago. (Gundle-Guani 1989)

For a while now, the US has been a solid and powerful democratic nation that, during the course of the last century has seen a huge economic, scientific and cultural development, above all it is the nation that has influenced the outcome of both world conflicts.

That said, it is also important to point out that the unparalleled and widespread development of American culture was not due to the relevance of their intervention to win both WWI and WWII, nor it was due to the lack of homeland enemy attacks that called for keeping up and running all the activities pivotal to the economic growth. Finally, the reason was not even ascribable than a large number of eminent representative in most fields of human knowledge emigrated there to flee from Europe, by then haunted by dictatorships and the nazi persecutions.

The reasons why the United States became the powerful nation that it is, have simply more to do with the profusion of great energy and resources for their self validation as a role model – the so called *American way of life* – set in motion from the *Cold War* era (Orwell, 1945)<sup>2</sup>, until today.

We are only partially aware of the great pervasiveness of the *American Way of Life*, the result of the huge accomplishment, achieved from 1947 till 1959 (Rossi 2019), ultimately aiming to promoting, informing and conquering, by way of the persuasive and seductive means of the so called *soft power*, all the nations devastated by WWII, and those ones that had not yet selected a model to pursue (the Communist or Capitalist one), in need of an economic, moral and material recovery.

What is meant by *soft power*, is well explained by Joseph S. Nye in one of his publications with the significant title: *Bound to Lead. The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990): it is the ability to achieve predetermined goals in terms of international relations through seductive means rather than coercive ones (Mattelart 2000).

The US cultural takeover of the world was most fully perceived between the 60s and the 70s of the last century, during the time of recovery and economic booming, when the effects of the *European Recovery Program* (ERP) policies and the *Organization for European Economic Cooperation* (OEEC) – the so-called *Marshall Plan* (1948-1952) – became most evident.

As a consequence of the ERP-OEEC policies and *Soft Power* strategies, more or less since the late 1950's, fridges, electric ovens, washing machines, dishwashers, radio devices, televisions, films, blenders, vacuum cleaners, grocery stores, drive-ins, comics, cartoons, Jeans, Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, fast food – items and objects commonly available in the United States since the 1930's – became widely available worldwide, allowing for the *American Way of Life* to take over the world promising prosperity and freedom.

The fascinating and seductive qualities of US goods radically changed not only the way Europeans lived, but also of all the people in the countries involved in the process of economic recovery and structural reconstruction.

Goods, products, and the several new methods of cooking food induced by the introduction of appliances such as *freezers and microwave ovens*, frozen food products, as well as all the other domestic appliances, all contributed to changing not only the way of living but also architecture and the idea of the city altogether.

Nonetheless, the US cultural colonization, through the deployment of appealing goods and products, led some of the countries under that spell to feel threatened; they soon feared that sooner rather than later they would become part of a great single system of social and cultural homologation, at first internationally and ultimately globalized, all over the planet: «the spreading before our eyes of a mediocre civilization» (Ricoeur 1961, p. 276), based on mass consumption. Those very same worries found an actual expression, especially in the 1960's, in the considerations of Paul Ricoeur (1961), Jean Baudrillard (1968; 1970; 1986), Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari (Deleuze-Guattari, 1972), Armand Mattelart (Dorfman-Mattelart, 1972, Mattelart, 2001) and of many representatives of the *intelligentsia* of that time, exposing an actual aversion and a juxtaposition between the “culture” of the old continent and the “uncultured” new world; however,

Outside the United States, people would probably not drink Coca-cola instead of any other fizzy soda, nor would wear Levi's instead of another pair of heavy cotton trousers, nor they would eat hamburgers instead of another nibble (not in large quantities at least) if they did not associate such things to an appealing way of life. (Gundle-Guani 1986, p. 562).

In retrospect, it is true that already after WWI, the idea that Europe was the cultural guide and the center of the world was a thing of the past.

In 1919 Paul Valéry writes

Everything came to Europe, and everything came from it. Or almost everything.

Now, the present day brings with it this important question: can Europe hold its pre-eminence in all fields? Will Europe become what it is in reality - that is, a little promontory on the continent of Asia?

Or will it remain what it seems - that is, the elect portion of the terrestrial globe, the pearl of the sphere, the brain of a vast body?

The German philosopher Oswald Spengler had introduced the brief time of peace, just after the Great War, with the publication of *The decline of the West* (1918), in which he figured that the end of Europe as the center of the Western civilization, was caused not only by massification and the lack of identity – because the individual is replaced by the mass – but also, and moreover, because of the crisis of its economic, cultural and military supremacy. Europe, was evident, was losing its strength to prevail over the world, and the world itself, anyhow, did not wish anymore to be under its thumb (Mattelart 2000).

It will be the punitive policies of the Versailles treaties - the humiliation of Germany and the debasing of Austria, once the important political centre of a multiethnic and polyglot empire, to a small nation state – to elicit and foment resentment and vengeful feelings, and implementing nationalistic policies which were going to almost completely erase the hope for political unity and the supposed supremacy of European culture.

José Ortega y Gasset in his book *La rebelión de las masas* (1930) did not accept the decline of Europe envisaged by Spengler and was completely opposed to the ones who claimed that the future of civilization would be delivered into the hands of America, denying Europe the chance to inherit

the role of spiritual guide of the world.

However, history was soon going to agree with Paul Valéry, who believed that in case of a world blast the only nation suited to preserving western culture was going to be the US, «the most fabulous creation of European esprit» (quoted in Mattelart 2000, p. 225).

Historically, American culture has always been considered as dependent and descendant of the one brought over by the colonizing nations that dominated over the New World. A vision shaped by western historiography, that had elected Europe as the landmark upon which the history of the entire humanity was built. The same sort of fate was to follow American architectural culture.

The primeval urban planning of the first settlement on American land acquired a pivotal role in consolidating the colonial empires of the European nations fighting for the domination of the New World (Reps, 1965), which was also the perfect place upon which to experiment and to enact Europeans' socialist (Cabet 1840) utopias (Kruft 1989). Thus, if the point of origin of the architecture of American cities came from the application of the models that belonged to the European colonizers (Reps, 1965), modern American architecture came from the "colonization" of the European masters that in the 1930s fled Europe's dictatorships and racial persecutions to settle in the United States<sup>3</sup>.

Besides the brief digression of the skyscrapers, the huge industrial buildings and infrastructures – so very much praised by Loos (1921), Le Corbusier (1923; 1937) and Mendelshon (1926) – for a long time it was believed that American architecture, as well as the culture, was dependent and heavily influenced by the European one. As observed by Peter Blake (1993; 1996)<sup>4</sup> and Tom Wolfe (1981), at the end of WWII the US university colleges and the schools of architecture adjusted to the principles postulated by Mies, Gropius and the Bauhaus.

Before the arrival of the European masters, the "modern" schools in America were probably only two – Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin and Eliel Saarinen's Cranbrook (who had moved to the US in 1923) – in the 40s they had almost all made the grade. Also, after the arrival of the European masters, the American teaching system that had been so strongly inspired by the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, did not seem to exist anymore, and the ones that had supported it were by then oriented elsewhere (Blake 1993, p. 44). Mies van der Rohe arrived in the US in 1937 thanks to the invitation of the young Philipp Johnson to build a country-house for Stanley Resor in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. In 1938 he settled down in the States for good, accepting, this time, the invitation made by John Holabird to take the position of director of di Armour Institute School of architecture in Chicago (which later on became the Illinois Institute of Technology).

Walter Gropius, after the distancing from the Bauhaus because of his political leanings to the left, found shelter in London, where he worked with Maxwell Fry from 1934 until 1937. Invited to the United States, he took over the department of architecture at the Graduate School of Design in Harvard until 1952, when he was invited by MoMA to organise the exhibition: *Bauhaus: 1919-1928*<sup>5</sup>.

The Bauhaus heritage found great hospitality at the *Black Mountain Institute*, founded in 1933 in North Carolina, where Josef and Annie Albers, and Gropius himself, were given each a teaching posts (Harris, 1987).

Herbert Bayer, director of the Bauhaus graphic and printing department, emigrated to the United States in 1938, invited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. –



MoMA's director – with the specific purpose of applying his museum displaying and installation theories to the MoMA's exhibitions *Bauhaus: 1919–28*, *Road to Victory*, and *Airways to Peace*<sup>6</sup>.

In 1932 New York's MoMA had organized the exhibition *The Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*<sup>7</sup>, curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Philip Johnson, Alfred H. Barr and Lewis Mumford, aimed at documenting the birth and the growth of the Modern Style that from that moment on became known as “International Style” (Hitchcock-Johnson, 1932). An exhibition that more than any other initiative had promoted the Modern Movement (the European one in particular) in the US (Riley, 1992). From that moment on the International Style became known as “the new American style”, as reminded us by Tom Wolfe (1981) and Peter Blake (1996). At that time, the most important publications fulfilled some sort of “didactic” purposes, in order to allow audiences and architects to approach the “new style”: *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (Hitchcock, Johnson, 1932); *An Introduction to Modern Architecture* (Richards 1940); *What is Modern Architecture?* (Bauer Mock, McAndrew 1942); they also witness its promotion: *An outline of European architecture* (Pevsner 1943); *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries Modern Architecture* (Hitchcock 1958); or else they introduce the the modern masters: *Pioneers of the Modern Movement, from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Pevsner 1936).

Henry Hobson Richardson, Henry Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright were included in marginal chapters, amid Romanticism, Art Nouveau and the proto-modern. Lewis Mumford stated in his *The Brown Decades* (1931), «There is still no accurate, authentic, intelligent, and fairly exhaustive history of American architecture» (Mumford 1931, p. 254).

Bruno Zevi's first publication *Verso un'architettura Organica* (1945) and the following *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1950), are the original evidence of an initial and exhaustive study that puts together architecture and American masters.

For the first time in the history of architecture, the characters and the newly born discourse around American architecture, assumed a determinant and paradigmatic role aimed to observe and interpret the growth of modern architecture. Zevi wrote (1945),

Numerous histories of modern architecture have been published in the last few years, mainly in the US and in England, and some of them are really excellent. Generally speaking though, those histories come to a conclusion after having dealt with the first generation of modern architects and the major masters who worked mainly in Germany and France [...] I propose instead to search for a guideline delving through the architecture of the most recent years; rather than a sort of history, it should appear as a chronicle, even though it is already obvious that we can see an intellectual and artistic attitude towards architecture worthy of expression. The best contemporary architects are heading forward, towards a kind of architecture that here has been given a name: organic. (Zevi 1945, pp. 11-12)

The meaning given to the term organic in Zevi's book (1945: 63-64), was changed by William Lescaze's words:

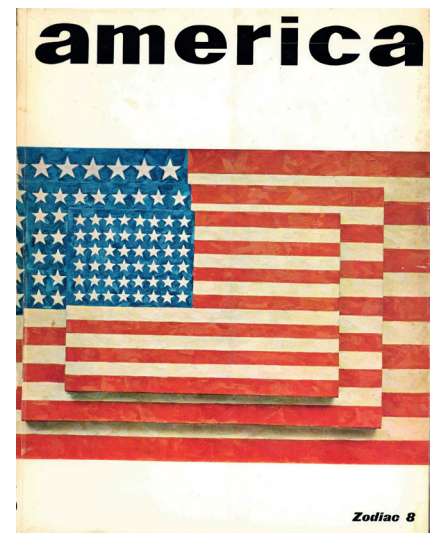
Organic is the word which Frank Lloyd Wright uses to describe his own architecture [...] This adjective was first applied to architecture by Wright's first employer, Louis Sullivan [...]. As Claude Bragdon [...] explained [...] architecture throughout the world and down the ages has been bisected by an inevitable duality, having been



**Fig. 1**  
Bruno Zevi, *Verso un'architettura organica*, cover.



**Fig. 2**  
Casabella 281, 1963, cover.



**Fig. 3**  
Zodiac 8, 1961, cover.

either organic (and as such following the law of natural organisms) or arranged (i.e. according to some Euclidean ideal devised by man). (Lescaze 1942, pp. 78-79)

With Zevi, Wright and the Organic Poetics of the architects of the Bay Region, Aalto and Scandinavian Empiricism became the reference point of Modern architecture; instead of Giedion and Gropius mechanization, instead of the CIAM and Le Corbusier. America, according to Zevi, became the cultural epicenter, the country able to put forward an alternative in opposition to the scientific assumptions and the regulations imposed by the *Existenzminimum* and the CIAM<sup>8</sup>.

Besides Zevi's point of view, Blake, in his *The Master Builders* (Blake, 1960), had even the "courage" to juxtapose Frank Lloyd Wright to Mies and to Le Corbusier, stating that no modern edifice ever built would have the appearance that it did if it was not for the works of those three masters (Blake 1960, pp. 17-18).

However, at the time, American culture of architecture still struggled to call itself independent and to emancipate itself from the European one as witnessed in 1965, by the MoMA important exhibition: *Modern Architecture U.S.A.*<sup>9</sup>.

The exhibition organised by Arthur Drexler, MoMA's director of the design and architecture department who took the place of Philip Johnson in 1956, was dedicated to the contributions of "American" architects to the Modern Movement, but, except for the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Greene & Greene and Irvin Gill, the most part of the architects selected to represent modern American architecture were foreigners emigrated to the US. Other "weak" aspects of the "authentic" conquests of American architecture: train stations, skyscrapers, bowling alleys, malls, drive-ins and motels; a topic that Reyner Banham addressed in an article written about the exhibition (Banham 1965).

Banham viewed as reductive Drexler's choice to showcase a repertoire of *International Style of Modernity* milestones, ignoring, on the other hand, the most representative US forms of architecture: the most "popular" and visible, literally *on the road*, to which, at least since 1932, Frank Lloyd Wright recognized the central role for the construction of the "new" cities:

The roadside service station may be – in embryo – the future city service- distribution. Each station may well grow into a well-designed convenient neighbourhood distribution centre naturally developing as meeting place, restaurant, restroom, or whatever



**Fig. 4**  
Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkey*, 1963, cover.

else will be needed as decentralization processes and integration succeeds. Already, hundreds of thousands occupy the best places in the towns or, more significantly, pretty well outside the towns. (Wright 1932, p. 289)

In Drexler's opinion, motels, supermarkets, bowling alleys, gas stations, Hamburger Stands were certainly the most popular and pervasive forms of architecture scattered throughout the US, but they were definitely not the most representative or worthy to be displayed at MoMA, a museum renowned for its proclivity for "high" and "learned" architecture.

At the Melbourne's conference, Peter Blake clearly stated that he believed (Blake 1971), like many others, that there was

no country more vulgar, more trashy, than the United States – The United States of Las Vegas fame, of Los Angeles fame, of honky-tonk and billboard-alley fame» (Blake 1971, n.p.).

Like Drexler, he too found deplorable the trivialities and visual pollution that spoiled the landscape and the streets of American cities – by 1963 he had also written a book on that topic, *God's own junkyard* (Blake 1963) – however, in Melbourne, he stated that

People like myself used to go around giving talks assailing this kind of thing and concluding that any country capable of producing such a massive outpouring of junk wasn't worth saving. (Blake, 1971, n.p.)

Soon though he had to change his opinion and admit fair and square that

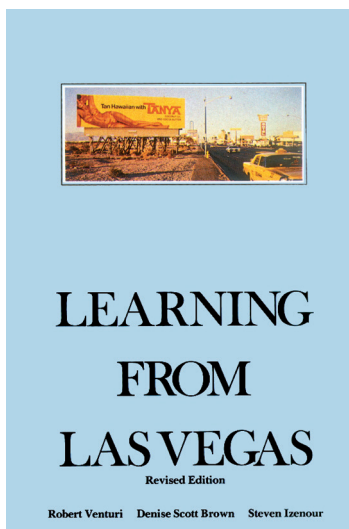
the most significant development in the arts [...] has been the emergency of Pop – or, rather, our recognition of what we once considered vulgar and trashy as a vast, untapped resource. (Blake 1971, n.p.)

In any case, before perceiving a substantial change between the "histories" of architecture written from a "European" or an "American" point of view, we will have to wait for the publications of the American architecture historian Vincent Scully Jr. (1961; 1969).

His first history of architecture, *Modern Architecture* (Scully 1961), was a first attempt in that direction, it was with *American Architecture and Urbanism* (1969) though that Scully addressed American architecture since its prehistory, observing how influential it had been on *Conquistadores*, like for example the cases of the San Esteban churches, built around 1630, or San Francisco in Rachos de Taos, built in 1772 in New Messico.

In *American Architecture* Scully studied the most original traits of American architectonic culture, establishing its independence from the European one, and pointing out what was more distinctively "American" than "European". If all that was not enough, in the introduction to *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* by Robert Venturi (1966, p. 6), Scully called it the most relevant text of architecture in the twentieth century, second only to *Vers une Architecture* by Le Corbusier (1923).

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, in particular, with *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), questioned the difference between high culture and lower more, trivial one, claiming the fact that legitimately, one could love at same time Italian Mannerisms and Vernacular American architecture as they both are authentic expressions of a culture and a civilization, an antagonizing view in opposition to the elitist concepts put forward



**Fig. 5**  
Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 1971, cover.





**Fig. 6**  
Tom Wolfe, Las Vegas (What?)  
Las Vegas (Can't hear you! Too  
Noisy), Esquire, February, 1964,  
pae 97.

a few years before by Blake and Drexler.

What was written by Tom Wolfe in *Las Vegas. What? Las Vegas Can't hear you! Too Noisy* (1964) and Rayner Banham in *Towards a million-volt light and sound culture* (1967), explains how the cultural climate had changed. According to them, Versailles and Las Vegas were the most authentic models of the Modern city in Western history. That is why what Scott Brown, Izenour, Venturi and their students, kick-started was not just the study of the city of Las Vegas, but of all the cities in the world that, sooner or later, would have developed in function of automobiles, commercials, shopping centers, fast food and gas stations, so wonderfully designed, described, studied and witnessed by Wright (1932), Rusha (1963), Wolfe (1964), Banham (1971), Scott Brown, Izenour, Venturi (1972), Blake (1963) and many others.

Soon the claim for independence, the snip of the umbilical cord of American architecture away from the European one, was definitely formalized, finally America not only had its pioneers, its heroes, its masters, its poets, its schools, its history, but also its tradition (Wrenn-Mulloy 1976).

Just after forty odd years since those first manifestations of cultural independence and awareness, in 2014, unlike MoMA's 1965 exhibition, *Modern Architecture U.S.A.*, in the occasion of the *XIV mostra internazionale di Architettura della Biennale di Venezia*, the US pavilion "demonstrated" the pervasiveness of American culture in the world with three catalogues. The first one, *OfficeUS Atlas* – a volume of 1230 pages – (Gilabert, Kubo, Miljački, Schafer 2014) consisting of a vast and exhaustive selection of articles written at the time, as evidence of the *overseas* works of American architects; essays and articles on the organizational structure (*business management*) of American firms; a series of professional business cards for many American architects, and much else. The second catalogue, *OfficeUS Agenda* (Gilabert, Lawrence, Miljački, Schafer 2014), containing essays on the "marginal skills" of American architects; on international cooperation in foreign countries<sup>10</sup> and on the role of American architecture as US ambassador in the world.

The last catalogue of the exhibition, *OfficeUS Manual* (Gilabert, Miljački, Carrasico, Reidel, Schafer 2014), a showcase of all the American firms' "good practices" aimed to ultimate, undisputed success; a proper manual of *business management* for architects. Visitors, walking through the US pavilion at the *XIV Architecture International Exhibition of Biennale di Venezia*, were literally invested by the humongous quantity of projects that Americans had carried out all over the globe.

An unnecessary sort of revelation, as the awareness and perception of American supremacy in the field of architecture, and not just in that one, was already a global phenomenon that did not need any further demonstration.

Armand Mattelart clearly stated (2000) that the only country in the world that, because of its sphere of influence, deserved the name of "global society" was the United States. Because of its maturity, American society was the one that was enlightening the path of the other nations. In political terms it was not possible anymore to talk about the US' "cultural imperialism" at the expense of the rest of the world because its cultural industry together with its models of organization were actually recognized as universal. What the US offered was a global paradigm of modernity, a behavioral model of values destined to be imitated all over the planet, which led Mattelart to prospect a new global society extrapolated from the archetype born and bred in the New World.



In terms of architecture it suffice considering how common it is the practice of building skyscrapers; originally an American archetype, an exclusively American construction – the only examples of tall buildings, prior to the 1920's, were visible in New York and Chicago – today skyscrapers are the “new” constructions most commonly displayed on the planet. Its great success comes essentially from the simultaneous representativeness of modernity, a symbolic value and the “Reklame Arkitektur” (Hilberseimer 1927), because «The Medium is the Massage» (McLuhan 1967).

The skyscraper though, is not the only protagonist of such a phenomenon. Enormous has been the success of chained-brand hotels, clothing franchises, fast food chains, large groceries stores, shopping malls, multinationals' headquarters (other buildings “originally” American), that nowadays they are globally widespread and adopted in geographical contexts very different from one another, promoting the creation of urban landscapes that little by little end up denying their original peculiarities and contributing to the creation of what the French anthropologist Marc Augé called the *Non-Lieux* [non places] (1992). Buildings, or multi units constructions elevated to be representative of modern societies, as well as developing countries, for their unfamiliar flair and their intrinsic quality to be endlessly repeated, easily transmigrated anywhere in the world without exceptions, which for people it is very comforting, because we feel protected from the “risk” of being “surprised” by “unusual” or “unknown” environmental contexts, and, at the same time, alienating because it appears as a universal place exactly the same anywhere we go.

During the early years of this third millennium, we have registered the increasing realization of edifices that deliberately resort to exceptional and daring solutions, as well as to sophisticated techniques to make those solutions the more possible, creating environmental contexts explicitly artificial and disengaged from locally affecting situations. At the basis of the most recent guidelines in terms of research, planning and the building techniques to make it all possible, is the belief that construction models do not necessarily need to be rooted in their own local contexts (the most appreciated aspect that has contributed to its great success and global promotion), ultimately severing the more direct ties with the local communities. In the US, the number of building initiatives characterized by works of the highest technological standards have more and more multiplied since the 1950s. Besides the skyscrapers, that we have already mentioned, in the labs of MIT, researchers have developed study programs and prototypes of houses powered by solar energy (Barber 2014; Barber 2016) and prefabricated, modular ones made of plastic (Behrendt 1958; Plastic Houses 1956). Gradually – at the MIT Media Lab – thanks to the extraordinary development of digital technologies, AI and domotics, it was soon possible to think about self-sustainable homes and to the *Cities of Bits: the Smart Cities* (Mitchell 1995; Song, Selim, 2022).

It was soon noted (McLuhan 1962) that worldwide media literacy would have facilitated globalisation, but also that the newly acquired electronic interdependence reproduced a kind of image of the world that recalled a global village (McLuhan 1962, p. 31).

According to McLuhan, the technocratic discoveries have recreated the “field”, whereby we live in a single restricted space resounding with tribal drums. That is why, today's preoccupations regarding the “primitive”, are just as banal as those ones for “progress” in the nineteenth century and just as irrelevant if we think about our problems (McLuhan 1962, p. 31),

McLuhan states clearly that

Ours is a brand-new world of allatonce. “Time” has ceased, “space” has vanished. We now live in a global village ... a simultaneous happening (McLuhan 1967, p. 63).

However, this kind of global model of modernity imposes, on one side, a consideration on the very concept of development, and on the other, on the issue of the cultural, regional and identity instances that Kenneth Frampton exposed in *Critical Regionalism: modern architecture and cultural identity* (Frampton 1980, pp. 313-327).

For a long while now, it has been believed that the current process of development – the so-called linear one – has almost exhausted and dissipated the resources of the planet and that globalization has jeopardized, if not actually annihilated, the diversities and cultural complexities of the many nations and countries of the world.

If the first statement may be true though, the second one still needs to be verified. Oddly enough, globalization is a phenomenon that has given a great propulsion to most identity instances in the last few decades, and it is also very noticeable that the issues pertaining the depletion of the planet resources and the consequent worldwide crises, correspond to the increasing, counter actions taken as measures of compensation and resilience advocated by *Critical Regionalism*.

For those reasons, today, we ask ourselves if the US model of growth, and of all of those that look at them as an example, can be actually replicated; in other words, can the developing countries, or the less developed ones – like Marx believed – follow on the footsteps of the United States of America? A country of huge dimensions, with unlimited (it was thought) mineral underground deposits and enormous oil fields. A land of abundance, projected towards a great future with endless possibilities.

At this point, the answer is very predictable and the question is a rhetorical one. Of course the opportunity nowadays, can not be anymore, and for almost anybody, the ones that have given the US such unquestionable leadership. The historical digression of linear development and consumerism of which the US have represented the model (Galbraith, 1958), is no longer (and has been so for a long time) viable and sustainable, not only for ethical reasons but also for the necessity to preserve the balance, already distraught and almost [?]<sup>11</sup> irreversibly compromised of our planet (Schumacher 1973).

However, today, the most popular buildings in the world are precisely skyscrapers, shopping malls and, by association, the redeeming, almost “salvific”, *Smart Cities*, elevated to role models for a new equilibrium: city, society and the planet. Models brought about and developed in the United States and, in time, scattered and assimilated all over the world, so that, as stated by Mattelart (2000), global society is nothing but the extrapolation of an archetype born and bred in the New World.

Those buildings though, as well as the *Smart Cities*, that have been adopted as global models, require huge amounts of power and highly functioning scientific, technical and IT systems. A paradoxical, ridiculous, if not tragic predicament, whereby countries much less developed use those models unconditionally, as pointed out by Richard Sennett and bringing about the obvious question in terms of planning of how it can be possible, that a country such as India, with a larger part of the population that has no access to drinkable water or to local medical surgeries, a country that

has no sewer system, tries to follow on such path doomed with failure, by planning one hundred brand new *Smart Cities* (Sennett 2018, p. 162).

Clearly, the inertia with which developing countries, or less developed ones than the US, want to reach the highest tops of developmental growth is a still open issue. Unfortunately, though, the linear model and global economic development – models adopted by all the industrialized countries, and supposedly not just them – have wasted and eroded the planet's resources, produced an incredible quantity of waste materials and almost erased regional and local cultural diversities.

In those simple terms, the culture of Critical Regionalism that also belongs to all the individuals that sensed that the possibility of a continuous and endless growth was purely delusional, will probably find today a renewed and necessary collocation.

In order to hinder the current growth model, perhaps will not be enough to apply the suggestions of Critical Regionalism or the research for a more circular model of consumption based on a smaller scale, regional standard of production – as put forward by Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1973); but it is certainly very probable that the many countries of the world will need to formulate new models of – critical – rethinking following each one their own inclinations, opportunities and local, (possibly regional ?) culture.

Frampton stated,

Critical Regionalism tends to flourish in those cultural interstices which in one way or another are able to escape the optimizing thrust of universal civilization. Its appearance suggests that the received notion of the dominant cultural centre surrounded by dependent, dominated satellites is ultimately an inadequate model by which to assess the present state of modern architecture (Frampton 1980, p. 317).

That would be very reassuring and we would be very happy to believe it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed, the image of its own future

<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking the beginning of the Cold War is chronologically set in 1947 with the ratification of the National Security Act (18 September, 1947) and it symbolically ends with the fall of the Berlin wall (1989) and the dissolution of the URSR (1991). Here instead, we indicate 1945 as the beginning of the Cold War, in juxtaposition with George Orwell's text, that as a reaction to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, writes the article "You and the Atomic Bomb" (1945): «The atomic bomb may complete the process by robbing the exploited classes and peoples of all power to revolt, and at the same time putting the possessors of the bomb on a basis of military equality. Unable to conquer one another, they are likely to continue ruling the world between them, and it is difficult to see how the balance can be upset except by slow and unpredictable demographic changes [...] that is, the kind of world-view, the kind of beliefs, and the social structure that would probably prevail in a state which was at once unconquerable and in a permanent state of "cold war" with its neighbours».

<sup>3</sup> In the USA were to emigrate: Theodor W. Adorno (1939), Josef and Annie Albers (1933), Herbert Bayer (1938), Peter Blake (1940), Max Beckmann (1933), Marcel Breuer (1937), Serge Chermayeff (1940), Albert Einstein (1938), Enrico Fermi (1938), Walter Gropius (1937), George Grosz (1933), Victor Gruen (1938), Max Horkheimer (1933), Fritz Lang (1934), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1940), Peter Lorre (1935), Thomas Mann (1939), Erich Mendelsohn (1941), László Moholy-Nagy (1937), Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (1937), Piet Mondrian (1940), Mies van der Rohe (1933), Berta and Bernard Rudofsky (1941), Josep Lluís Sert (1939), Hans Richter (1940), Arnold Schoenberg (1933), Georg and Maria Ludwig von Trapp (1938), Oskar Wlach (1940), Bruno Zevi (1940) e many others (the date indicates the year of arrival in the USA).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Blake's observations pertaining to the influences of the European masters that emigrated to the US, belong to rather recent publications, although they go back to the early 1950s as documented in *No Place Like Utopia* (Blake, 1993), risalgono ai primi anni Cinquanta.

<sup>5</sup> *Bauhaus: 1919-1928* [MoMA Exhibition. #82, December 7, 1938-January 30, 1939].

<sup>6</sup> *Road to Victory* [MoMA Exhibition #182, May 21-October 4, 1942], *Airways to Peace* [MoMA Exhibition #236, July 2-October 31, 1943].

<sup>7</sup> *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* [MoMA Exh. #15, February 9-March 23, 1932]

<sup>8</sup> Let us not forget that Zevi, because of the fascist government racial laws, left Italy in 1939, going first to London and then, in 1940, to the United States, later graduating at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, directed at the time by da Walter Gropius, and discovering Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1943 he went back to Europe aboard a naval ship that arrived in Glasgow. As a refugee he then goes back to London and the US Army puts him in charge of the planning of military camps and prefabs in preparation for the D-day in Normandie. In London he attends the RIBA library and puts together his first book, *Verso un'architettura organica*.

<sup>9</sup> *Modern Architecture, U.S.A.* [MoMA Exhibition #767a, May 18-September 6, 1965].

<sup>10</sup> The work of Albert Kahn, Ford's architect (Bucci, 1992), is very emblematic, especially the construction of the industrial compounds in Russia.

<sup>11</sup> The question mark indicates the uncertainty of such a statement. We still do not know if we have irreversibly disrupted the stability of the planet or if we are still in time to intervene on the process already triggered by deforestation, by air and water pollution... caused by the greenhouse effect, by tornadoes, by the rising of the level of the oceans, by the melting of glaciers and the ice cap... by pandemics.

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