

Alberto Ferlenga The end of Regionalism

Abstract

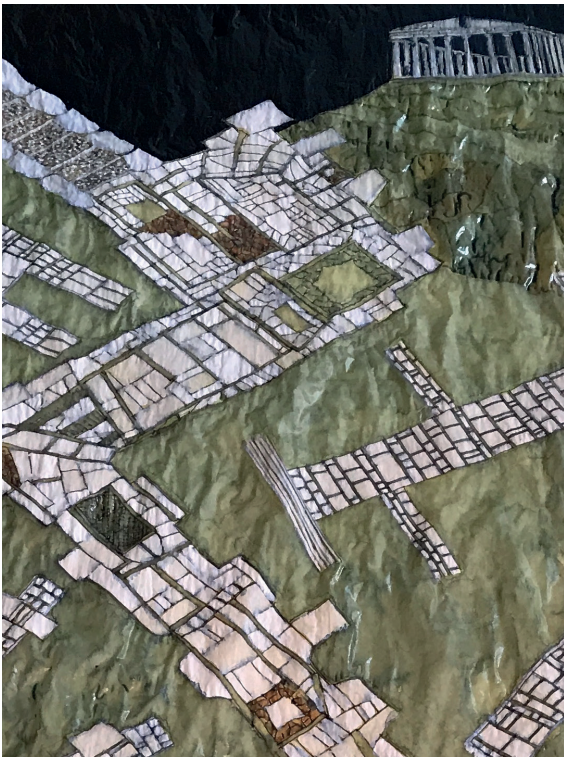
The text will start from the origins of the “critical regionalism” denomination to investigate the consequences of the “operational” approach to the history of contemporary architecture. In particular, I will start from the new framework in which the role of architecture today arises and from how this derives a need for an overall “repositioning” of the architect and his culture which requires, in addition to a change in responsibility and age, tools also reconsideration of the architectural events that preceded us and of the approach to their analysis. I will consider how the “regionalistic” position of many characters has produced a double consideration of the events of a modernity that today more than ever appears unique, multifaceted and useful perhaps more for what it contained “marginal” than for its mainstream. Finally, I will deal with an attitude, in the past practiced by architects, that of the construction of a “history” useful for the trade, now almost completely abandoned, and the risks that derive from this.

Keywords

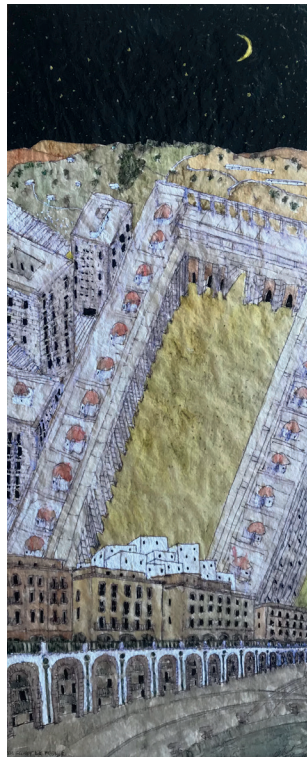
Constantinos Doxiadis — Ekistic — Megalopolis — Favelas

[...] In the last twenty or thirty years, new directions in contemporary architecture have not come from Europe alone: A Universal civilization is approaching, and its development shows no symptoms of international standardization. Its common element is its conception of space, which is in keeping with both the emotional structure and the outlook of the period [...] There is yet another factor of equal importance, one that arises from an attitude shared by the best contemporary architects. These architects aim, above all, at taking full account of the changeless atmospheric and topographical conditions of a country, which are no longer obstacles but springboards for the creative imagination. It has often been observed that the painting of the present century has repeatedly taken soundings of the past in order to renew contact with kindred elements in mankind of earlier times and to derives strength from this contact. Neither I have elsewhere called this coming to terms with pre-existing atmospheric and topographical condition a “new regionalism” [...] Within this common concept of space, many different forms of architecture are developing, leading to unexpected situations. (fig.a,b,c)

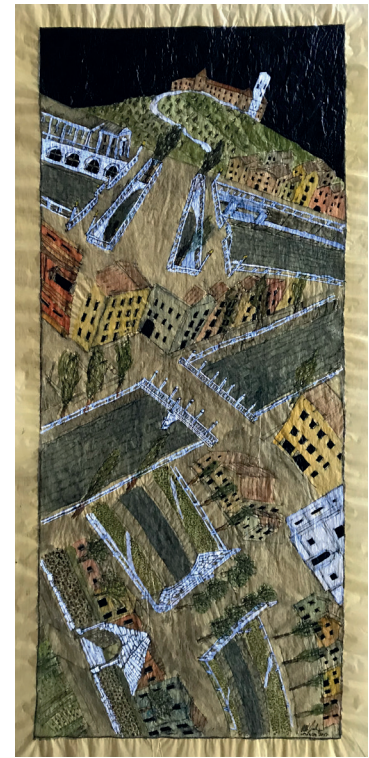
Thus wrote Sigfried Giedion in 1960 in his introduction to *The Works of Affonso Eduardo Reidy* by Frederick A. Praeger, (fig. 1) the first monograph on the work of the Brazilian architect whose works include the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro and the Assunción Experimental School in Paraguay (fig. 2). In his introduction, Giedion refers to ideas he had conceived of as early as the 1940s while a member of the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*). These would lead him to gradually detach himself from the more dogmatic interpretations of the Modern Movement and adhere to a new vision of architecture that was more attentive to its relationship with the local environment and history, as well as to the themes of urban sustainability and liveability. Themes that in those years began to emerge from the CIAM crisis, appearing in the the-

**Fig. a**

Alberto Ferlenga, drawing dedicated to Dimitris Pikionis, watercolour and fountain pen on yellow sketch paper.

**Fig. b**

Alberto Ferlenga, drawings dedicated to Fernand Pouillon, watercolour and fountain pen on yellow sketch paper.

**Fig. c**

Alberto Ferlenga, drawings dedicated to Joze Plecnik, watercolour and fountain pen on yellow sketch paper.

ories of well-known architects such as Richard Neutra or Aldo Van Eyck and which, in a more complete form, constituted the leitmotif of the work by the Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis (fig. 3). Doxiadis was an internationally renowned urban planner who was consulted by the Democratic Establishment of the US and the United Nations for interventions in cities on the frontline of the Cold War. One of the first ‘disciples’ of Dimitris Pikionis at Athens Polytechnic, Doxiadis was, among other things, the proponent of *Ekistica*, a science based on the relationship between architecture and settlements which, despite its stretching of the facts and its ambiguities, had the merit of foreseeing current issues relating to urban sustainability. This was the premise for the (then) recent study of the expansion of cities, presented by Jean Gottmann in his *Megalopolis* of 1961 but also evident in the dramatic settlement problems that followed the Partition of India (1947) and, even earlier, the *Katastrophé* of the Greeks in Asia Minor (1923).

Giedion was introduced to Doxiadis’ writings by Jaqueline Tyrwhitt (an English urban planner and fervent follower of Geddes and his theories but also an active member of CIAM) before embarking on significant research work with the ‘*Ekistic*’ observatory in Athens. This brought together global and local themes with a study of ancient settlements already begun by Doxiadis in his doctoral thesis *Architectural Space in Ancient Greece* (fig. 4). The thesis, discussed in Berlin in 1936 and translated into English by Tyrwhitt in 1972, drew on ideas relating to the dynamic composition of the monuments of the Acropolis advanced by Auguste Choisy in his *Histoire de l’Architecture* (1899). In the chapter dedicated to the Greek Picturesque, Choisy’s images were also used, as we know, by Le Corbusier in *Vers une architecture* (1923) and in Pikionis’ considerations on the construction of the Greek sacral space through visual geometric systems. Doxiadis, however, extended the observations of the Acropolis to other cases of sacred enclosures and Greek cities, suggesting the reuse of ancient settlement principles to reiterate a dynamic relationship between public space and

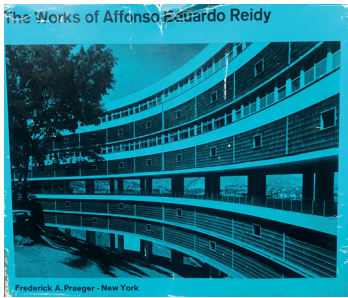


Fig. 1
Cover of *The Works of Affonso Eduardo Reidy*, 1960.

Fig. 2
View of the Experimental School in Assunción, Paraguay by A.E. Reidy, 1953.



Fig. 3
Cover of the book *Architecture in Transition* by C. Doxiadis, 1963.

Fig. 4
Cover of the English-language edition of C. Doxiadis's thesis *Architectural Spaces in Ancient Greece*, 1972.

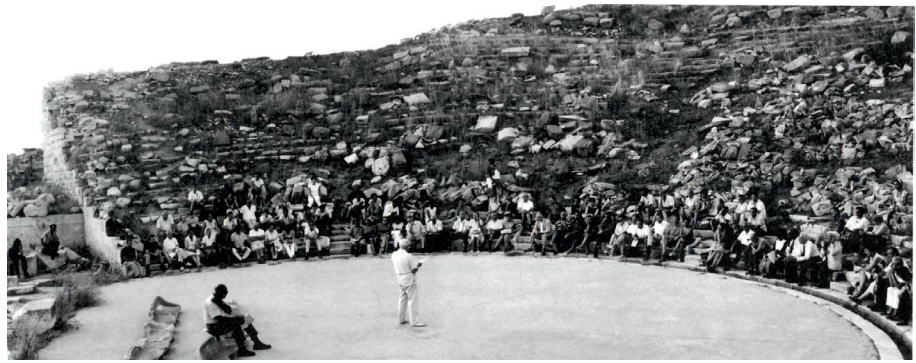
architecture and, by doing so, improve quality of life. In addition to Gottmann, historians such as Arnold Toynbee, Margaret Mead, scientists such as Jonas Salk, landscape architects such as Lawrence Halprin, engineers such as Buckminster Fuller, and architects such as Fumihiko Maki or Hassan Fathy would go on to join the ‘*Ekistic*’ group (fig. 5). Hassan Fathy’s experiments on materials and climate conducted in Egypt and Iraq are referred to explicitly in another passage of Giedion’s introduction to *The Works of Affonso Eduardo Reidy*.

The concepts of linking architecture with the environment, of mega-cities that can be ‘scaled down’ to a human dimension by subdivision into smaller communities, the new forms of living, attention to climatic factors, traffic, and to environmental issues in general, were the subjects of in-depth discussion between 1963 and 1975 at the Delos Symposia, (fig. 6). These events – often cited but, today, not often studied – overtly referred to CIAM’s itinerant conferences. Tyrwhitt and Giedion provided a sort of ideal continuity to these conferences while, at the same time, expanding the number and diversifying the type of participants; they may also have been the first to draw the attention of a broad spectrum of cultural figures to the new aspects of an urban world whose benchmarks were changing.

In an era that saw the thrust of the avant-gardes lose momentum in the face of new social and economic emergencies, as well as developments in communication that radically altered the exchange and transmission of ideas in social and urban fields, Giedion perceived the changes occurring in architecture. He had worked on these questions in Canada between 1951 and 1957 as part of the Exploration Group, together with McLuhan and Tyrwhitt herself, and went on to hone the definition of New Regionalism to describe a nascent attitude in architecture, thus attributing a positive meaning to this term. Despite this, his considerations reveal the ambiguous difference between a mainstream still influenced by CIAM and the avant-garde, and a new architecture that was still considered secondary in terms of geographical location and formal expression, even when it was capable of discerning and conjugating the new needs of the world. This was an architecture that encompassed local experiences, political involvement (frequent and often questionable), close relationships with existing cities, diversified languages, and complex relationships with technology. An architecture that cannot be traced back to

**Fig. 5**

H. Fathy, plan of the small town of New Bariz in the oasis of El Kharga in Egypt, 1965.

**Fig. 6**

Plenary meeting of the Delos Symposia in the Delos Island Theatre, 1968.

styles, schools or movements but rather finds its common trait in the relationship with what Pikionis called the ‘only tradition of Architecture in the world’ (fig. 7-8) conjugated in a thousand versions but substantially unitary in principles. And it is precisely the recognition of ‘anomalous’ protagonists like Reidy by attentive but ‘conditioned’ observers like Giedion that paradoxically highlights an act of obscuration. This act was perpetrated by the most advanced architectural culture against a new approach to architecture that could hold its own against more well-known methods but was branded outdated and not particularly significant.

Manuel de Solà Morales, in a 1987 essay published in Spain in *UR, urbanismo revista*, 5 and a few years later (1989) in Italy in *Lotus International* 64, entitled *Otra Tradición Moderna*, was among the first to try to define within twentieth-century history the contours of this new and, in many ways, precursory tradition, especially as regards the urban context.

In Holland, the well-known works by Willem Dudok and J.J. Oud, and to the same extent the more classical works by Michel de Klerk or Hendrik Petrus Berlage, exemplify a style of urban project that can be considered an interference within an established context. Works by Giuseppe de Finetti, Emilio Lancia, or Giovanni Muzio in Milan, those of Kay Fisker, Carl Petersen or Ivar Bentsen in Copenhagen, those of Eliel Saarinen in Helsinki and Sven Markelius in Stockholm, those of Joze Plecnik in Ljubljana, and those of Francesc Folguera in Catalunya or Secondino Zuazo in Madrid, manipulate the city as a field of new architecture without ever losing sight of its role as an instrument for urban order. This is a wise discipline whose starting point is love rather than contempt for the existing city and, for this reason, makes its transformation even more challenging... It was a form of urban planning that measured itself against the distinct condition of each urban element, with the idea of the city as an increasingly rich, diverse, and complex artifact. I believe that it is here, in this complexity, that the true tradition of the modern city must be recognized [...] (Solà Morales 1989) (fig. 9)

Manuel de Solà Morales’ point of view focuses primarily on the city but if we were to widen the discourse to what have become topical themes, such as those relating to the environment or to identity, the writings and projects of the last century would offer us a range of considerations that are similar in terms of foresight and usefulness.

These are less conspicuous and more realistic ‘experiments’ than those of overt modernity, revealed in often difficult formal expressions, and not always represented by iconic buildings, but capable of producing recognizable urban fragments that can lead to research into various aspects of traditional architecture and of cities: from Amsterdam to Ljubljana, from Hamburg to Athens, and from Sweden to Spain. They give us a picture of ideas and projects which, purged of cumbersome ideological ballast and the pretextual evaluation of critics, gradually proved to be both fertile and

**Fig. 7**

D. Pikionis, the tea pavilion and church in the complex of St. Dimitris Loumbardiaris in Athens in its present condition.

**Fig. 8**

D. Pikionis, the tea pavilion and church in the complex of St. Dimitris Loumbardiaris in Athens in its present condition.

boundless. A few years after Giedion, Kenneth Frampton recognised the existence of this approach but, in his eagerness to label the phenomenon, and to distinguish it from others, he ended up repeating the same error as the German historian. As in Giedion's case, but with the aggravating circumstance of a clearer historical situation, Frampton's interest in the less conventional developments in architecture of the last century, summarized in the definition of Critical Regionalism, cannot escape the intrinsically limiting character of its own denomination. This resulted in the pinpointing of niche urban areas, unrepeatable projects, and personal preferences. Thus, once again, a part of the complex history of twentieth century architecture – in which the avant-garde and the traditional are often intertwined in the creations of the same protagonists, and ideas pass through personal relationships that had little to do with architectural movements – is reduced to a background event and a showcase of isolated personalities who may be important figures, but who are left waiting to be recognised as part of an authentic surge of innovation.

**Fig. 9**

F. Pouillon, Climat de France in
Algeri, 1960.

Frampton writes:

Critical Regionalism necessarily presupposes a more explicitly didactic relationship with nature than that defined by the abstract and formal traditions of avant-garde architecture (Frampton, 1984)

but is it correct to apply this label to architects such as Plecnik, Pouillon (fig. 10) or Pikionis in Europe or Reidy and Vilanova Artigas in Brazil, just to name a few examples? Should we not, instead, consider their contributions as essential components of modernity in architecture – a single, multifaceted, and complex history, rather than as a catalogue of false connect-edness or as a sum of complete opposites? If we accept the idea of a single, complex history as our starting point, an entire century of architecture that continues to influence us today can become an even more valuable terrain that has yet to be fully explored. And, again, using this view as our starting point, we should note how attention to places and identities has always been a constant throughout the history of twentieth-century architecture, even when futuristic intentions and the promotion of palingenetic concepts seemed to obscure everything else.

What has changed over time, however, is the degree of importance attributed to this research, and its usefulness in addressing today's issues. This awareness has increased alongside the difficulty of recognizing what the contemporary world has generated in terms of physical appearance in cities and in the environment, with the failure of large-scale design or control tools on one hand and, on the other, that of free-market-oriented solutions. The coex-istence of globalization phenomena and local differences is now a consoli-dated fact, the latter frequently offering greater formal richness and capacity

Figg. 10, 11

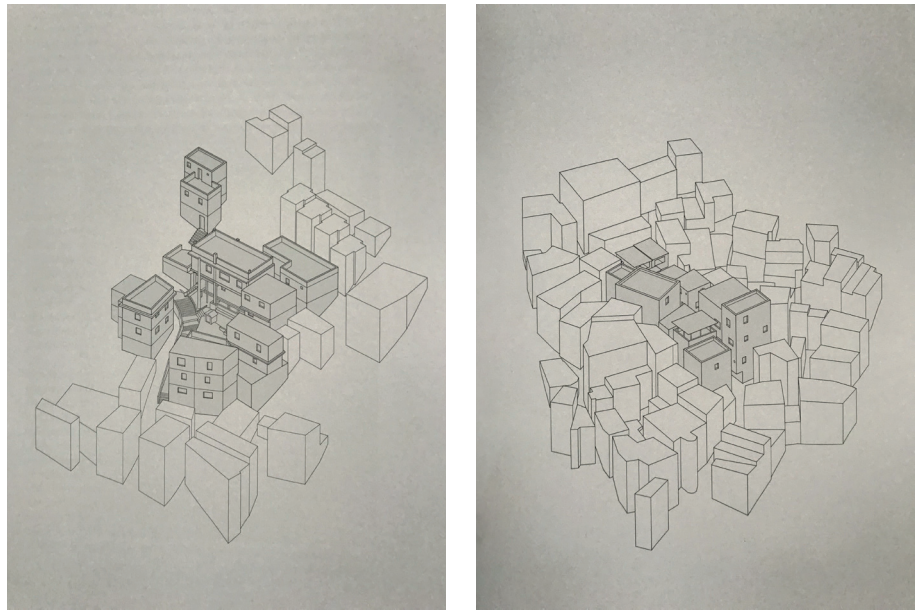
Images of Venice during the 2020 lockdown, photos by U. Ferro and L. Pilot, from *Venezia Vuota*, by A. Ferlenga and F. De Maio, 2021.

**Fig. 12**

Barrios Informales in the centre of Lima, photo: A. Ferlenga.

to adapt to the problems of our world than the former. Also, the framework within which we are moving is no longer that of economic progress and all-encompassing ideologies, but rather of transition and uncertainty within a major environmental, social, and urban crisis. This is a picture that atypical intellectuals such as Oswald Spengler, Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford, Jean Gottmann, and Doxiadis himself perceived as the priority of a new era. They are bearers of a culture whose intuitions about the future appeared much closer to reality than those prefigured by the leaps forward of the so-called avant-gardes: a *new realism* rather than a *new regionalism*.

Identifying a field of study within a forgotten history, however, is obviously not enough: present-day emergencies require more than the revival of anticipatory ideas conceived of in circumstances that have changed dramatically. They require forms of knowledge and practical and theoretical tools which together can form a 'secular' culture suitable for addressing today's world in all its contradictions. Within a dynamic history that saw different approaches to urban planning move in and out of favour, this means resuming the analytical, close-up reading of the phenomena in progress as regards the formal aspects of cities where architectures from

**Figg. 13, 14**

Surveys of housing aggregations in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, from: *Informal rooting* by A. Tessari, 2020.

different historical periods can merge, giving a special connotation to the idea of modernity. This was an interpretation of the world, its cities, and its landscapes that was interrupted for at least 50 years and which, to a great extent, was conceived and had its greatest development in Italy. This also implies returning to consider the exemplary value of areas that, like Italy, present themselves as living archives of urban-architectural values. Each Italian city has a unique character that was shaped by history, and its own identity that clearly cannot be reproduced. What can be replicated, however, are its dimensions, the extent of its public spaces, its relationship with topography or landscape, its being incorporated into larger metropolitan or natural areas, and its ability to produce a special well-being in terms of liveability and work. In this unique and tragic period of the Covid pandemic, Venice (fig. 11-12), for example, has amply demonstrated this. But it is not just history that continues to inform us. The need for identity also emerges in places – increasingly widespread in the world – where life is marked by temporariness and despair. Suketu Metha in his book *The Secret Life of Cities* (2016) dedicated to Italo Calvino, and ten years later in *Maximum City* returns to the same themes, re-reading the slums of Mumbai where the inhabitants, despite living in extremely precariousness conditions, reconstruct desperate forms of identity by naming sewer streams or heaps of garbage with the names of the rivers and hills of their distant villages, an attempt to create a reminder of their previous architectural and public spaces. The same thing could be said when considering the evolution of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro or of the *barrios informales* (fig. 13) of Lima where spaces and architectures re-aggregate to generate an evocative and social value that, inevitably and unconsciously, recalls the memory of the city, and where infrastructures (funiculars and stairways, for example) are transformed to mark the presence of new identities.

These are recurring themes, but the conditions and dimensions in which they occur now, and our greater sensitivity towards the environment, require an overall reconsideration of histories, theories and tools, and a new understanding of the contemporary conditions of urban living (fig. 14-15). With these, we will be able to identify the materials and tools that can give life to virtuous processes of transformation that affect the most densely inhabited parts of the world and not just the few square meters of indistinguishable Downtown metropolitan areas.

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