

Kenneth Frampton  
**40 years for an Architecture of Resistance, an interview**

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Abstract

In an interview with Ugo Rossi, renowned architectural historian Kenneth Frampton reflects, forty years later, on the concept of critical regionalism in the light of the social and cultural changes that have taken place as globalism gains ground.

Keywords

Critical regionalism — Globalisation — Kenneth Frampton

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**Ugo Rossi:** *Dear professor, when you wrote, “Critical Regionalism: modern architecture and cultural identity” (1980), the process of globalization was in its early stages, what do you think has actually changed since then?*

**Kenneth Frampton:** Nothing much has changed, except the dominance of global corporate Capitalism is stronger than ever! As Frederick Jameson put it not so long ago it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of Capitalism! I would be the first to concede that Capitalism as Neocapitalism after the end of the Second World War was a very productive moment in European history most particularly in the Netherlands, Scandinavia and briefly in the UK and we might say that Denmark today still represents the triumph of this hybrid economy in terms of the well-being of the society in relation to the natural world! Regrettably, nothing could be further from this than the rise of Neoliberalism in the 1970s with Ronald Reagan, Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher! Much the same would eventually happen in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

**UR:** *Ricoeur’s essay has had a certain relevance in relation to “Critical Regionalism”, your article opens with a long quote from it. If you were to write about critical regionalism today, where would you find your inspiration?*

**KF:** One might just as well cite Antoine de Saint Exupéry which I do quietly at the beginning of *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (Frampton 1995) to the effect that “We don’t ask to be eternal beings. We only ask that things do not lose all their meaning”. Otherwise I suppose Harris Georg Gadamer’s

*Truth and Method* of 1975, as I do in my work *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture* in 2015.

**UR:** *Critical Regionalism* was written with an antagonist attitude towards globalization and postmodernism phenomena. In which way do you think your text might have been an attempt to define an alternative path for the modern?

**KF:** My involvement with the Critical Regionalism argument was an effort to posit an ethical expression in the Post Modern movement.

**UR:** *If today you had to deal with an article on resistance/opposition to globalization, which alternative way would you follow?*

**KF:** On what may one predicate a resistant culture today? There is an aspect of my Critical Regionalism thesis which is often ignored namely the cantonal concept of some measure of direct government which is always surely latent in the Italian/European city-state. Hence my interest in Hannah Arendt's concept of "space of public appearance as a micro-political realm". This leads one to think about the importance of the school-cum-community centre as a resistant place. It is significant that a recent mayor of San Paulo who was from Lula's Workers Party managed to build some 30 schools during her tenure, all of them situated in favelas. This may be seen as Critical Regionalism at its most resistant.

**UR:** *Since the current processes of cultural globalization appear to be about fulfilling their achievements, what is the purpose of talking about regional architecture?*

**KF:** These last questions bring us back sooner or later to the same question which is ultimately a political question in which architecture has only a minor role to play! So, in that sense, Critical Regionalism was already irrelevant even at the beginning of the 80s when it was first formulated by Tzonis and Lefaivre (1981) and then by me! In this regard, it was always a holding operation. This was always the case with architects that I have at various times identified as Critical Regionalist such as Alvaro Siza, Glenn Murcutt, Antonio Coderch, Carlo Scarpa, Tadao Ando, etc.

**UR:** *In terms of design and planning process, how is regional architecture different from international and global one?*

**KF:** Legend has it that Ando once gave a commission back to a developer with the words: "I think over a certain height architecture is no longer possible". In the 33 volumes study, *The Endless City* researched by the London School of Economics (2007) they point out that in 1980 there were only 120 buildings in the world over 8 stories in height whereas in 2005, 25 years later, there were 10,000! by which time 50% of the world's population was living in cities, many of them in megacities with populations ranging from 20 to 30 million!

There are corporate architectural practices all over the world designing mega high-rise structures in such cities but whether these works are of any kind of cultural significance remains doubtful apart from the pollution pro-

duced by such structures and the consumption of non-renewable resources that they embody. From this standpoint Critical Regionalism lies close to the ethics of Ernst Friedrich Schumacher's book *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973).

**UR:** *Critical Regionalism was put forward as an alternative to Postmodernism, in reaction to globalisation. Don't you think that nowadays Critical Regionalism, as a response that same escalated globalisation, appears more as a necessity than simply a proposal?*

**KF:** What is of a necessity nowadays is a significant worldwide response to global warming but that tragically will not be prioritized by the Biden government when it takes over on January 20, although it would surely help to restart the US economy!

**P.S.**

Dear Ugo, I think that all your questions are variations of one fundamental question: What is the point of continuing with a 40-year-old "critically resistant" thesis when we are witness to the worldwide triumph of Neoliberal late Capitalist modernisation? Your critique of this current situation is virtually the same as that which was sympathetically formulated by Frederick Jameson in his 1994 book "The Seeds of Time" (p. 189-209).

During our interview, you rightly challenged me as to the pertinence of my continuing with this 40-year-old resistant stance originating in Alex Tzonis and Liane Lefevre's seminal essay of 1981 "The Grid and the Pathway" which was surely the inspiration behind my 1983 essay, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Ten Points for an Architecture of Resistance". As you rightly pointed out at the time what can be the pertinence of this thesis given the subsequent worldwide triumph of neoliberal globalized Capitalism; a movement which was already underway with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the US in the early 70s & the anti-welfare state economic thesis of Von Hayek, later embraced by Margaret Thatcher. However, one could say that the 5th edition of my book *Modern Architecture: a Critical History* (2020) proves the validity of the Critical Regionalism argument in that modernity is being inflected differently across the world.

In his book "The Seeds of Time" of 1994 Frederic Jameson analyzes Critical Regionalism as an aesthetic with a political overlay in a particularly sensitive and yet rigorous manner! He writes: "The category of the joint as a primal articulation of the two forces that meet in it along with its correlative of the break or dis- joint ... the point at which things break against each other rather than connect, that significant fulcrum at which one system abruptly ends to give way to another (and here he is referring to my essay, "Rapell a l'ordre" of 1991) would seem to be the fundamental aesthetic of Critical Regionalism".

Forty years separate the first and fifth editions of *Modern Architecture: a Critical History* (1980 and 2020), with the first edition coinciding with the 1980 scenographically postmodern Venice Biennale of that year! The 1st edition written between 1970 and 1980 was an operative history in large part of the interwar Modern Movement conceived as a progressive left-wing sequel to Banham's anti-Marxist, "Theory and Design in the First Machine Age" of 1960! Where the 1st edition opened with Walter Benjamin's image of the Angel of History of 1944, written just before his suicide,

the 5th edition opens with a citation from Guy Debord's "Comments on the Society of the Spectacle" (1988; 1990), ending with the words "power saved by the media from having to take any responsibility for its delirious decisions thinks that it no longer needs to think and indeed cannot think". At the end of the first edition, I wrote: "The veil that photo-lithography draws over architecture is not neutral. High-speed photography and reproductive processes are surely not only the political economy of the sign but also an unfair filter through which our tactile environment tends to lose its concrete responsiveness. When much of modern building is experienced in actuality its photogenic sculptural quality is denied by the poverty and brutality of its detailing ... That modern society still possesses a capacity for such refined inflexion finds its confirmation in the finest work of Aalto. Against his inspiring achievement, the tendency of modern building to be devoid of content, to be reduced through the way it is built returns us to the Heideggerian challenge that building, dwelling, cultivating and being were once indivisible".

Here we already have the roots of Critical Regionalism "Avant la Lettre" plus my shift to the tectonic in the 90s (1995). However, my reference to Aalto in 1980 may also be seen in retrospect as advocating an alternative modernity! However, as Jameson points out in *The Seeds of Time* (p. 26 to 30) this alternative has also been rendered inaccessible via the highly destructive titanic forces unleashed by the forces of late capitalism! What can one say in the face of this? Perhaps one can only offer the myth of Critical Regionalism as a hypothetical ground upon which one can still create a microcosmos.

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Kenneth Frampton, architect, critic, historian and author, Kenneth Frampton is the Emeritus Ware Professor of Architecture at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University, where he taught from 1972 to 2020. Frampton has written extensively, and his numerous publications and essays gained him an international reputation as a leading scholar of modern architecture. His seminal writings include an essay, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”; and several books, most notably “Modern Architecture: A Critical History”, “Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture,” and “A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Analysis of Built Form.” Along with architects Peter Eisenman and Mario Gandelsonas, Frampton was a founding editor of *Oppositions*, an architectural journal produced by the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies from 1973 to 1984.