

Enrico Prandi  
**On globalization, regionalism and the Smart City**

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Abstract

In addition to the specific editorial by the editor of the monographic issue, this article critically examines the positions of the different invited authors. To this is added indirectly the personal reflection on the themes proposed by the curator through a grid of twelve questions.

Keywords

Critical Regionalism — Smart City — Globalization — Kenneth Frampton

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With this issue, 61 edited by Ugo Rossi, FAM delves into the broader reflection on the globalization of cultures, regionalism and the Smart City. The method with which the curator has constructed his palimpsest is a grid of twelve questions provided to the authors together with an introductory text: the guests were asked to «provide reflections, studies and research, experiences and testimonials addressing the questions, or to extend the problems». Questionnaire questions, which can be read in the curator's article below, range from regional architecture (its existence, purpose and meaning) versus global architecture and the Smart City model as a proposition for architecture in developing contexts. In the palimpsest of questions, it is not difficult to understand the equation between the capitalist global city and the Smart City and the danger that developing contexts run in pursuing these universal models.

In the brevity of an editorial that critically introduces the theme, I don't shy away from providing my personal point of view indirectly starting from the essays by the various authors.

Critical Regionalism and its (alleged) rebirth guide the reader in the various contributions which have the merit of fueling the discussion around one of the moments in the recent history of architecture, such as the attempt to overcome the Postmodern. The evolution of the term Critical Regionalism and its relevance after a period of oblivion, the thesis here subject to critical verification, demonstrates how it can accommodate examples that are also very distant from each other.

Therefore, some clarification is appropriate starting from the origins of the concept itself at the end of the 1970s interpolated with the current reflections of Kenneth Frampton (the militant critic of Critical Regionali-

sm) interviewed for the occasion by Ugo Rossi himself.

Like other terms, as courageous in the attempt to define attitudes as labile in specific definitions, also Critical Regionalism – which Frampton himself (1984) invites us not to understand either as a style or as a historical period – can be better understood by difference, also clarifying what it is not: Critical Regionalism is not vernacular; Critical Regionalism is not the spontaneous product of the multiple interaction between climate, culture, myth and craft (that is, spontaneity must be replaced by the intentionality of critically measuring oneself with the elements of transformation). Critical Regionalism is linked to the “Schools”; Critical Regionalism is anti-centrist (and therefore against globalization); Critical Regionalism aspires towards forms of cultural, economic and political (therefore even more anti-global) independence. (Frampton 1980, p. 313).

With the exception of the question on the Schools, we have outlined the majority of “good contemporary architecture” as regionalist architecture, meaning as such that which is attentive to the different contexts and their characteristics (thus excluding architecture indifferent to the context, interchangeable which does not seize the opportunity to introject and re-elaborate stylistic, formal, typological, symbolic and so on characteristics typical of the place of belonging). But if we reintroduce the criterion of the Schools then the concept immediately becomes more complicated if not contradictory. The proliferation of Schools, their hybridization with topical issues, the often spurious character of a supra-regional dimension makes the application of this principle inapplicable in the contemporary world. What could be, for example in the Italian context, the “[recently formed] regional schools, whose main aspiration is to reflect and deal with the specific constituent elements on which they are based”? (Frampton 1982, p.371). None. If we extend the reasoning to the vast international context, probably some exist.

At the end of an intense *Post Scriptum* to the interview published in this issue, which begins as an ancient epistle, Kenneth Frampton proposes the myth of Critical Regionalism as a «hypothetical terrain on which to create a microcosm again», an alternative modernity such as that of Alvar Aalto. Even the theme of other modernity is a road already taken at the level of international critical literature to define irregular figures of modernity.

Beyond the theoretical implications of a debate that lasted almost twenty years – and in some ways sterile in focusing too much on the attempt to define something elusive – we can understand a “Critical Regionalism of return” if it can be defined in this way, in a broad sense as a attention to contexts (an attitude that still characterizes a large part of Italian architecture) but above all, as Ugo Rossi underlines in his essay on the USA, as a “cultural resistance” in antithesis to a globalizing and internationalist (consumerist) approach: a balanced planning between an instinctive and spontaneous attitude that flows into the vernacular and, on the contrary, an attitude indifferent to the context, culture and specific identities.

In the succession of critical contributions Luigi Coccia proposes as a regionalist a manifesto work by Peter Zumthor such as the Terme di Vals judging it with good reason as a «design experimentation that favors the development of a strong culture full of identity, which nevertheless keeps open contacts with the universal technique» (Frampton 1983): although a solitary experience not ascribable to a specific school, the analysis is particularly interesting also thanks to Peter Handke's theoretical-interpretative filter. While Ettore Vadini analyzing some points of Framptonian precepts

verifies the hypothesis that the Paulista School in its decline of modernism in a specific way could be, yes in the vastness of the overall production, attributable to regionalist architecture.

As demonstrated by his article, Nicola Pagnano imports into China a contextual critical attitude that derives from an Italian and in particular Venetian training, while on the contrary the Chinese majors are exporting an uncritical attitude to the new Asian markets (India and Africa in primis). acontextual and linguistically homogenizing in reducing the different characters to banality.

Also for this reason the weighty theme of the globalization of cultures will be taken up indirectly in one of the next issues (for which the call for papers is still open) dedicated to tropical architecture in Sub-Saharan Africa, i.e. that form of contextualism typical of tropical band that finds in the geographical and climatic conditions the reason for resistance to a real estate market also managed from the planning point of view by foreign investors. A new form of «economic neo-colonialism» as defined by Anna Bruna Menghini which is part of that cyclical process of colonization and decolonization of which the author clearly explains the historical reasons for a loss of cultural identity and stylistic-figurative hybridization. In anticipation of a new «African identity» – perhaps it would be appropriate to speak in the plural of specific identities for a vast and composite continent such as Africa – projects by a (relatively) young and effervescent generation of architects working in Africa are presented, whether they are indigenous such as the Pritzker 2022 Diébédo Francis Kéré (from Burkina Faso but trained in Germany) and David Adjade (from Tanzania but trained in Great Britain) as well as allochthonous such as TAM, the Caravatti brothers and others.

Not without reason Ludovico Micara appeals to the «compromise between global thrusts linked to modernization [...] and resistances, or rather, “existences”, of identities, traditions, customs, uses». Thus, taking the theme of Islamic architecture as an example (Islamic, of Islamic countries, etc.), the author presents some of his projects in Tripoli in Libya and Yazd in Iran demonstrating patient research between historical reasons and contextual that make the interpretation of the place in its complexity and vastness the origin of every transformation intervention.

Finally, Costantinos Doxiadis' Ekistica is the background to the contribution of Ray Bromley who summarizes the principles of a “science of human settlements” as a premise for the development of a city on a human scale. Beyond the implicit visionary nature of ekistic thought, the most significant contribution of Doxiadis' experience is the audacity of the attempt to plan the future of settlements in the complexity and totality of aspects. As history teaches, visionaries, in addition to exerting a certain charm, have the advantage of promoting discussion and stimulating innovation.

Faced with the current conditions of crisis (environmental, social and urban), Alberto Ferlenga proposes a “new realism” instead of a “new regionalism” (hence the title *End of Regionalism*) based on the analysis of urban phenomena taking as a case study the Italian city and therefore placing itself in continuity with the tradition of studies interrupted half a century ago. “Learning from the Italian city” to paraphrase the title of Francesco Tentori's book on Venice, in turn derived from the more famous “Learning from Las Vegas” by Venturi-Scott Brown.

I consider a final clarification necessary on a term as slippery as it is abused and misunderstood even by many insiders such as that of Smart City: after

the first phase that psychoanalysts would call the “honeymoon” between scholars, architects and the digital world (the city of Bits, Smart City 2./3./4.0, etc.), the time is ripe for the return to the responsibility of the architectural project in the transformation of the city.

I already had the opportunity to express this concept a few years ago by arguing that the truly intelligent city is one in which the project is intelligent in its traditional, classic and ever-present forms (*Smart Design for a Smart City*, N. 33 (2015)). No technological-IT superstructure will be able to beat the architectural project in terms of intelligence and efficiency (and in this we also include the concept of sustainability, another often abused term), if it is born contextually to the place and if it is not spoiled by speculative pressures.

The traditional city, which arises from the balanced interaction between climate, culture, myth and craft (i.e. mediated by the ability of the architect), is the intelligent city par excellence. Calling it a city of cultural resistance, a city of Critical Regionalism or a city of New Realism, at this point is indifferent; the important thing is that, as the latest Frampton underlines, “it can still make possible the creation of a microcosm” that reflects the identity characteristics of different cultures.

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