

LOCAL MODERNISM AND UNIVERSAL AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT.

Universal aesthetics are often attached to a narrative about modern architecture that in turn opens up the question of Local Modernism versus an 'International Style'. With exponential globalization, we witness an effect of a universal aesthetic that can be exchanged throughout different countries and continents and calls for a re-evaluation of collective form.

Throughout history, vernacular building styles, elements and aesthetics that can often be classified as local, have emerged in different countries as cultural identity of a determined region. Furthermore, in recent years, several architectural practices explore the advantages of local techniques and materials, blend them with global modern aesthetics and import them into different cultural contexts. The aesthetic of a global architecture is thereby recreated using artisan and handmade products, yet the cultural value of the region is often irrevocably lost in the process of blending different traditions. On the one hand, architects who are recognized for having been long established as eminently local are expanding their practices to other countries. Such as Peter Zumthor's project in Los Angeles or Álvaro Siza's most recent projects in China, Taiwan, and the United States. On the other hand, Fumihiko Maki's strong links between Eastern and Western building traditions and materials throughout his career were followed by his 1960s theoretical investigations into collective form and Francis Kéré's social engagement in architecture brought him back to his native Burkina Faso blending traditional materials with a Western aesthetic. The question of how to classify these architects' works might therefore be instrumental to create a new perspective over the shifting boundaries of regional and global modernism and the appropriation of local tradition and universal aesthetics. We wish to further argue how the universal aesthetics shape our perception of global versus local modernism.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will try to tackle the issue of a Local Modernism in the setting of Global Aesthetics from four different viewpoints. In the first instance, Siza is taken as a reference point for Frampton in his afterthoughts to his famous essay of Critical Regionalism, of an architecture that is not exclusively local but rather aids as an example of modern architecture. In the case of Maki, his Hillside project is derived out of his idea of Group Form, in which he tries to approach the mega-structure not as the project that is ultimately regarded as solving problems of the metropolis. Francis Kéré's emphasis on social engagement is justified by using local materials and involving the community. Although aesthetics is not his first priority, his architecture is carefully designed and adapted to a universal aesthetic.

2. ÁLVARO SIZA AND CRITICAL REGIONALISM

In the essay "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism" (1983) Kenneth Frampton lists a series of architects who were then working as "resistant practices of peripheries" in an ever more centralized and globalised world. In the text, Frampton refers to the practice of Álvaro Siza as the ultimate example of what he considers to be "the capacity of regional culture to recreate a rooted tradition while appropriating foreign influences".¹ This practice presented a hybrid between local culture and international influence and includ-

ed a "response to the urban fabric and marinescapes of the Porto region"² but also used "Aalto's collage approach to building form [...] mediated by normative typologies drawn from the work of the Italian Neo-rationalists".³

In the text, Frampton mentioned the fact that Siza did not at the time have many built works concluded, that most of them were altered by the occupants, and cites a long passage by Siza where he describes poetically the metamorphosis that occurred after the building's occupation: "Pieces are kept here and there, inside ourselves, perhaps fathered by someone, leaving marks on space and people, melting into a process of total transformation".⁴

Regarding the inevitable modification of buildings, Frampton refers to Siza's "hyper-sensitivity toward the fluid and yet specific nature of reality"⁵, and it was that very fluid nature of reality and context that steadily changed since the late 1970s which allowed for Siza's architectural practice to operate beyond its peripheral condition, adopting a position rather as a representation of an abstract notion of periphery, mostly related with geographically as well as culturally marginal nature of Portugal in relation to the centres. If in the 1970, Siza's practice was aligned with the *arrière-garde* position proposed by Frampton, in which architecture is sustained as a "critical practice"⁶, since then the geographical and social contexts within which Siza's practice operated in the last decades changed steadfastly.

As with other prestigious architectural practices operating in the global world, Siza's practice expanded its territory

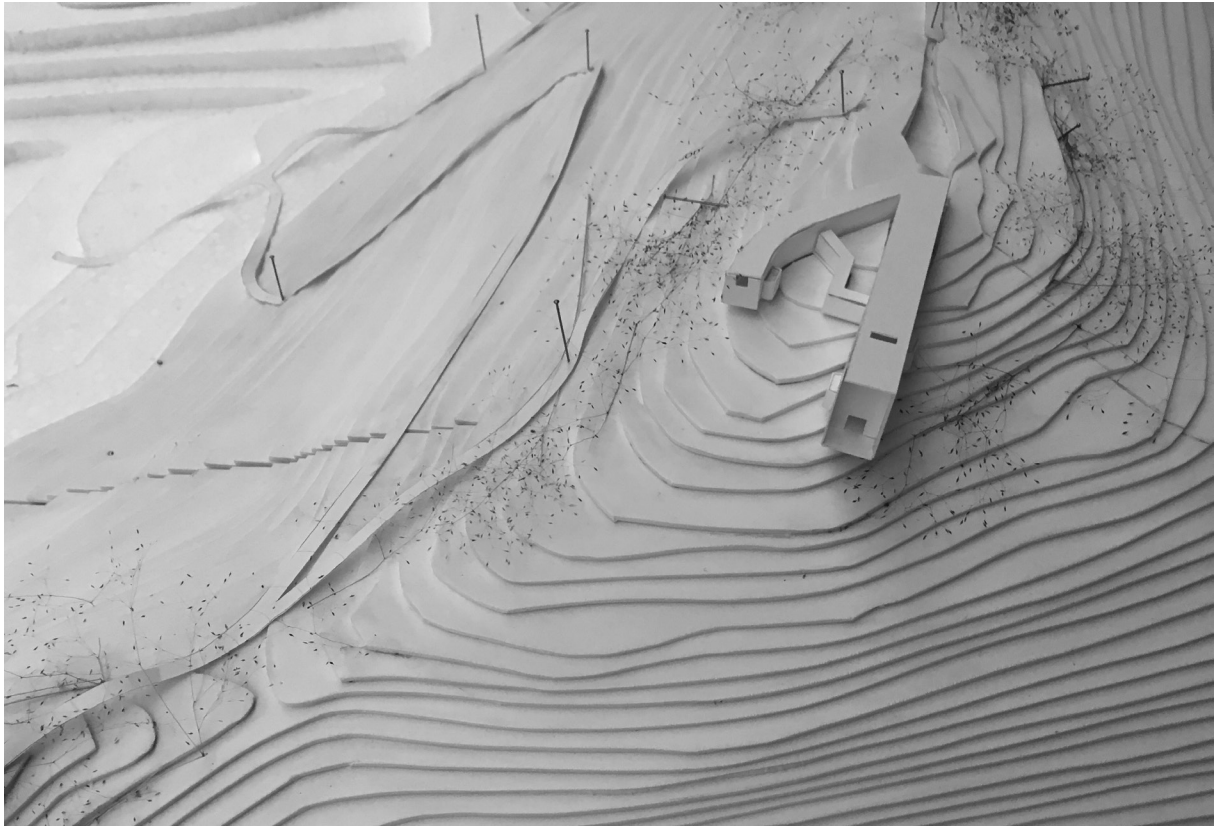


Fig. 1. & 2. Álvaro Siza and Carlos Castanheira, Models for Art Pavilion Saya Park, Gyongsangbuk-do, Daegu, South Korea. Photo: © Eliana Sousa Santos.

of operations to other European countries in the 1980s and 1990s, to South America in the 2000s, to Asia in the 2010s and more recently to North America (Fig. 1).

An example of this adapting nature of Siza's practice is the project for the Saya Park Art Pavilion in South Korea that was converted from a previous proposal of a Museum

for Two Picassos — a project commissioned as an exhibit within the context of the Madrid European Cultural Capital in 1993. In this specific case, the work of Siza became self-referencing, and even though the project is presented in the short press releases as buildings that “exactly adapt to the place dialoguing with natural light and panoramic views”⁷, it



Fig. 3. Fumihiko Maki, Hillside Terrace, Daikanyama, Tokyo, Japan. Photo: © Eliana Sousa Santos.

works mainly as a sculptural work (Fig. 2).

3. FUMIHIKO MAKI AND GROUP FORM

As one of the early proponents of the Metabolist Manifesto, Fumihiko Maki developed a long career that encompasses different types of buildings. Nevertheless, Maki's practice was informed by his early scholarship that allowed him to travel the world and find connections between different architectural cultures. Maki studied and worked in the United States in the 1950s. In 1958, he was awarded a Graham Foundation grant which allowed him to travel and study traditional building patterns. As he later described this experience:

*I visited Hydra, in Greece, where I was stunned by the kind of harmony created by certain principles in the formation of the town (...) I tried to discover some theoretical foundations as to how such formations could be created in present urban situations.*⁸

It was this scholarship that allowed him to further develop some of the early ideas of the Metabolist manifesto into the notion of megastructure and to create the notion of group

form.

As Maki defines, group form is a "system of generative elements in space" which "are reciprocal, that is, one cannot be conceived of without the other," furthermore "there is no hierarchy, or even singularity of form in this system" and its configurations work within "humans association and collectivity — gathering, or dispersal, or stopping." And Maki associates group-form with traditional housing conglomerates and that "any form so conceived reflects the source of its place and shape, as readily as do the pueblo villages of the Southwestern United States."⁹

Maki's practice explored the idea of group-form in the housing development Hillside Terrace in Daikanyama, Tokyo, a project extended over a long period of time, since 1967 to 1998, and that consequently transformed with the changing context of the city and the society. According to Maki, "Hillside Terrace reflects how [his] approach to architecture evolved as [he] learnt from earlier experiences as changes took place in Tokyo's scenes and lifestyles"¹⁰ (Fig. 3).

4. FRANCIS KÉRÉ AND SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE

Hardly any architect is so attached to the concept of social engagement as Diébédo Francis Kéré. He has claimed his



Fig. 4. Francis Kéré, Opera Village Africa. Photo: © Erik-Jan Ouwerkerk.

position in architecture rooted in his profound responsibility to give back to society by not only using local products but furthermore by engaging the community in the building process and therefore putting his training directly at the service of the local community. Born in 1965 in the small village of Gando in the West African country of Burkina Faso, he trained as an architect in Germany where he is now based. While still studying, he returned to his native Gando to build his first project, a Primary School, so local children would be able to gain an education and not be sent away from their families. As Gando did not have electricity he invented a technique whereby the mud bricks are pressed and dried and not burned. The bricks are created out of a mixture of clay, sand and a small percentage of cement, to ensure its durability during the rainy season in Burkina Faso. Throughout his projects, Kéré uses traditional building materials such as mud bricks, straw roofs, eucalyptus wood, laterite stone, local rock and metals not only as a cheap source but also to educate the community into new ways of building (Fig. 4).

Through collaboration with the performance artist Christoph Schlingensiefel, he took part in the Opera Village project in Laongo. The controversial project sought to create a centre for cultural exchange for artists from different na-

tions in one of the poorest countries on earth. Schlingensiefel likened the Opera Village to the idea of the 'social sculpture', a concept first introduced by the artist Joseph Beuys as the potential for art to transform society. The artwork itself thereby expands to include human activity which in turn can shape or change an environment and affect the people inside that environment.

Kéré's philosophy to create local identity by using local materials aids this shared view on the concept of social engagement. By working with the communities and training the locals the skills of building, Kéré claims that the social concept is further substantiated by offering alternate ways of providing for their families in the future. "This decision to put his education directly at the service of the family can be seen as a special sign of solidarity and the assumption of personal responsibility from a European perspective."¹¹ Although Kéré claims to be predominantly concerned with the social aspect of building, his architecture "...is carefully designed, responds to cultural nuance, adds aesthetic value, and facilitates new or better communication within a community", which Lepkik claims "is by necessity rarely a priority for [projects of social engagement]."¹² In doing so, Kéré's westernized vision of a global aesthetic is embedded into the concept of social architecture and transported into his

projects in Burkina Faso.

5. PETER ZUMTHOR AND LOCALITY

Peter Zumthor has been known for his meticulous approach to architecture. His careful selection of form, materials, light, space and location is evident through his projects such as the Thermal Bath in Vals (1996), his Art Museum in Bregenz (1997) or his museum "Topography of Terror" (2010). Besides his emphasis on the materials, often locally sourced, his careful consideration of the context has often been discussed. As he also stated in *Thinking Architecture*:

When I concentrate on a specific site or place for which I am going to design a building, when I try to plumb its depths, its form, its history, and its sensuous qualities, images of other places start to invade this process of precise observation... Sometimes they come to me unhidden, these images of places that are frequently at first glance inappropriate or alien, images of places of many different origins¹³

or even in his later theoretical work *Atmospheres*:

Reading a place, becoming involved with it, working out the purpose, meaning and goal of a brief, drafting, planning and designing a piece of architecture is therefore a convoluted process that does not follow a straightforward, linear path.¹⁴

Yet, one of his more recent projects, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), has gained much criticism from locals as well as many architectural critics even before its construction. The existing museum, in much need of renovation and extension underwent multiple proposals before Peter Zumthor's involvement in 2009. The new plans for the museum now envision a downsized version of the museum, far away from its original concept or the need to expand the space. Further criticism was gained through the money spent on such a new museum that does neither seem to have the space for its existing collection nor the ability to expand. This lack of constraint of expenditure is also in contrast with Zumthor's otherwise simplistic approach to architectural forms and materials. Zumthor's vision of the best architecture seems to be lost in the case of the LACMA:

The magic of the real: that to me is the 'alchemy' of transforming real substances into human sensations, of creating that special moment when matter, the substance and form of architectural space, can truly be emotionally appropriated or assimilated.¹⁵

Zumthor's otherwise careful selection of locality is thereby undermined and replaced by the tasks itself: To create a mega-volume combining the four existing buildings into one element.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper the topic of Local Modernism versus a Universal Aesthetic is discussed through four different examples. Each one is set in a different location, at different times by a different architect and is dealing with different local and global issues. Siza's projects in South Korea, Maki's Hillside Terrace in Daikanyama, Tokyo, Francis Kéré's Opera Village in Laongo, Burkina Faso and Zumthor's Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in the US demonstrate the problematic of a universal aesthetic versus the aim of local aesthetics and highlight the multitude of different problematics raised within this concept.

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- 1 K. Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism", *Perspecta*, 20, 1983, 147–162., doi:10.2307/1567071, 148.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.151.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.149.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.150.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 K. Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", H. Foster (ed.), *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, New York, The New Press, 1983, 16–30.
- 7 S. Peluso, "Art, nature and religion: three concrete buildings by Álvaro Siza in South Korea". *Domusweb*, 2018, November 13, accessed on January 27, 2020, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2018/11/13/art-natureand-religion-three-concrete-buildings-by-lvaro-siza-in-south-korea.html>.
- 8 F. Maki, "My urban design of fifty years", *Ekistics*, 73 (436/441), 2006, 26–38., accessed on January 24, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/43623717, 26.
- 9 F. Maki & J. Goldberg, "Linkage in Collective Form", *Ekistics*, 14(82), 1962, 100–104, accessed on January 24, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/43615995, 100.
- 10 F. Maki, "My urban design of fifty years", 32.
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- 12 A. Lepik, *Small Scale Big Change: New Architecture of Social Engagement*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 12.
- 13 P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2010, 41.
- 14 P. Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects*, Basel, Birkhäuser, 2018, 7.
- 15 P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 85.

