

A4616: World Architecture and Critical Regionalism, 1970-2015

Professor Kenneth Frampton

Wednesdays 9AM – 11AM

Avery 412

Office hours by appointment only

TA: Matthew Kennedy (mtk2127@columbia.edu)

Prologue: Analytical Research Seminar

This seminar arises out of the thesis that today the culture of modern architecture is being sustained worldwide through a number of architectural sub-cultures each one having a more or less regional and/or national basis. As is implied in the citation above these manifestations invariably depend on a certain measure of local prosperity combined with a progressive socio-cultural vision about the nature and identity of the society in question. Generally this entails the mutual cultivation of a collective discourse in architecture as this crops up from time to time in various parts of the world. Thus despite the fact that there is an ever escalating proliferation of barbaric development world-wide, there co-exists along with this aberrant condition a number of highly refined architectural sub-cultures which transcend through their significance the seeming global triumph of ‘star’ architects. The hypothesis behind this seminar is based on the conviction that a generally high level of coherent local architectural culture over a period of time is of more consequence to the society than the global success of any number of familiar brand names.

This seminar attempts to move away from an exclusively Eurocentric worldview which until now has characterized most accounts of contemporary architectural culture. The intention is to assemble a more diverse survey of contemporary practice, which will hopefully afford a richer picture of environmental culture across the globe than what is currently available in the media with its tendency to focus on the practice of internationally renowned architects. To this end after three introductory lectures, the seminar will be structured around student presentations taking the form of critical appraisals of a number of pre-selected architectural works. Individual student research will be developed through tutorials, interspersed with the seminar presentations. After presenting their research, students will be expected to write up their findings and to submit these as illustrated and foot-noted papers for a grade at the end of the semester. Any future publication of this material will be appropriately credited to students involved.

One of the hypotheses lying behind this exercise is the concept of a continually inflected modern tradition which, in its specific development, can be identified as pertaining to a particular part of the globe and thus to a specific climate, topography, culture and economy. In this regard it is assumed, after Zygmunt Baumann’s study *Cultural as Praxis* (1999), that:

“The ambiguity which truly matters, the sense-giving ambivalence, the genuine foundation on which the cognitive usefulness of conceiving human habitat as the ‘world of culture’ rests, is the ambivalence between ‘creativity’ and ‘normative regulation’. The two ideas could not be further apart, yet both are – and must remain – present in the composite idea of culture. ‘Culture’ is as much about inventing as it is about preserving;

about discontinuity as much as about continuation; about novelty as much as about tradition; about routine as much as about pattern-breaking; about norm-following as much as about the transcendence of norm; about the unique as much as about the regular; about change as much as about monotony of reproduction; about the unexpected as much as about the predictable.”¹

This dialogical view of culture serves to confirm that we are justified in invoking a certain ‘tradition of the new’ in relation to a broader and seemingly endless process of continual modernization. My contention is that this received tradition when qualified by a more critically inflected notion of modernity, is able to engender a particularly sensitive collective architectural discourse. A corollary to this is that such ‘discourse’ comes into being not only through the theory and practice of particularly talented individuals but also through the self-conscious cultivation of a tradition predicated on similar themes and/or ideological tropes. Thus we may say that in every regional sub-culture there emerges into prominence a number of seminal works, which inform the historical moment and drive the collective effort forward, as the manifestation of a particular ethos over a certain time period.

Analytic Method & Course Requirements

With the advice of the tutor, students working in pairs, will research a pre-selected “cluster” of buildings in a particular sector (region/country) over a certain period of time. The pre-selection is based on the presence of a “school” or better still a particular ethos of discourse pertaining in a given place over a certain period. The question necessarily arises as to the local traditions that these works evoke or allude to. The assumption behind this is that as in other cultural fields, informed critical appraisals play a part in the cultivation of a cultural discourse; that is to say they help to establish an informed mode of beholding which constitutes a body of work as a creative gesture in itself. Some attention has to be paid to the previous generations going back to 1970, whose mode of operating has to some extent passed with modifications from one generation to the next.

Students will be expected to make a presentation to the seminar as a whole of the respective works under analysis and subsequently to write up their findings as a paper with adequate illustrations and footnotes. Paper must be submitted to receive a grade by Friday, December 16. The tutor will make himself available to each pair on at least two occasions prior to the presentation to the seminar and on one other occasion afterward. The precise dates and times for these tutorials will be set up on an ad hoc basis to fit in with the student’s individual schedules.

¹ Zygmunt Bauman. *Culture as Praxis*. London/ Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage Publications, 1999, p.xiv.