On Kenneth Frampton's Project

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ABSTRACT
Kenneth Frampton, a prominent scholar in the history, theory and criticism of architecture, studied at the Architectural Association in London in the 1950s and was the technical editor of Architectural Design magazine. Since 1972, he has been teaching at the School of Architecture at Columbia University, where he is Ware Professor of Architecture.

In the present interview, the author of Modern Architecture: A Critical History *(1980) talks about his project as a critic and theoretician, his evolution and influence. Moreover, he reviews some precedents of the Modern Movement and highlights the critical and interpretative function architecture history should undertake.*

INTRODUCTION
Who has the project? The architect or the historian? In his book Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism, *Anthony Vidler analyzes the project of four prominent architectural historians of the twentieth century.*[1] *Vidler is interested in how histories of modernism were constructed as explicit programs for the theory and design of the periods they were written in. The implicit argument is that the "project" ultimately resides with the historian (Vidler, 2008). If we follow Vidler, we can understand the historian as someone who can look retrospectively at a series of buildings, writings, exhibitions and cultural manifestations, and constructs historical narratives that in turn influence contemporary practice. Hence, the claim of the architectural historian as someone with a project is convincing.*

Kenneth Frampton (1930, Woking, England) is a prominent scholar in the history, theory and criticism of architecture. After studying at the Architectural Association in London in the 1950s, he worked for Douglas Stephen and was the technical editor of Architectural Design. *In 1964, he began to teach sporadically in the East Coast of the United States, in Princeton University. As of 1972 he teaches permanently at Columbia University, where he is the Ware Professor of Architecture. In addition, he has been a visiting professor in a number of international universities. Amongst his well-known works is* Modern Architecture: a Critical History *(1980), which has been translated into multiple languages and has a revised fifth edition coming out at the end of 2014.*

With the purpose of understanding the different stages and arguments he has developed throughout his career, I have interviewed Frampton several times over the last two years. The present interview is the last of these conversations, and it is organized almost exclusively around questions that relate to his project. This interview is also a partial summary of major topics from our previous conversations.

INTERVIEW
What should be the role of an architectural historian?

Architectural history, like all history should seek to reveal the cultural pattern of the present and the times that preceded. This particularly applies to the Modern Movement and the modern predicament in general. Before 1750 there was no history in the modern sense, so relatively speaking, history is a latecomer when compared to literature or law.

The historian's role should be an interpretative, where the past is always being reworked in the light of the present. I subscribe to E. H. Carr's view as set forth in his book What is History?, *to the effect that each age writes its own history so that in this sense there is no absolute history.*

How would you describe your project as an architectural historian?

What I have been very loath in a way to acknowledge is the fact that I am a not strictly speaking architecture historian. When my collection of essays Labour, Work and Architecture *was published, the essays were grouped under three headings: theory, history and criticism. In the preface to the book, I try to make the case that I am not truly speaking either a theorist or a historian, and not even a critic on a regular basis. I settled for a writer on architecture but this is decidedly lame.*[2]

As far as I am concerned, the first task of the architectural historian is to reinterpret the history of the Modern Movement. This movement begins in real earnest after the First World War, when it is at its highest energy, something that comes to an end after twenty years with the Spanish Civil War and then followed by the Second World War.

The second task is to develop a critical contemporary discourse as I attempted to do in my Studies in Tectonic Culture. *This is perhaps a categorical example, in as much as it is a reinterpretation of historical fragments going back to the nineteenth century, as a species of operative criticism done in order to afford a ground for architectural practice in the present.* Studies in Tectonic Culture *arose out of my theory of Critical Regionalism. This concept of Critical Regionalism was coined in in 1981 by Alexander Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre. In 1983 I wrote "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," and amongst these points there is one that raises an implicit opposition between the tectonic and the scenographic, and out of this there finally came* Studies in Tectonic Culture.

Anthony Vidler, in his 2008 book, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism (Writing Architecture)*, analyzes the historical periods where his four case studies located the kernels of modernism. For Emil Kaufmann it was in the Neo-classical period, for Colin Rowe in Mannerism, for Reyner Banham in Futurism, and for Manfredo Tafuri in the Renaissance. Where do you see early kernels of the modern project? Do you agree with any of the four historians Vidler talks about?

I think that these are examples of proto-histories of the Modern Movement, but what interests me more is the full force of the Modern Movement after the First World War. That is, from the point of view of models of practice, what happened in Russia, Germany and the Netherlands after war is more interesting. It seems to me that the Modern Movement becomes much more finely articulated between the First and Second World Wars. To this must be added the syntactical and semantic articulation achieved by Frank Lloyd Wright, but also is relatively late compared to the models that Anthony Vidler cites. By 1910 Wright has developed an architectural syntax of extraordinary richness. So, those figures are for me more important than the proto-moderns that Vidler cites.

From your *Modern Architecture: a Critical History*, to your essay on "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," and moving forward to your interests in *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, and of course allowing you to expand this genealogy into your other multiple writings, what do you think has remained constant in your interests as a historian and what has changed? Do you see your body of work as part of the same narrative?

Compared to my early involvement with avant-garde expression in Russia, Germany and the Netherlands, I suppose I have become more conscious of the poetic potential arising out of modes of construction and structure. I think that what one may detect in Studies in Tectonic Culture *is a move away from avant-garde aesthetics to a discourse that is more tectonic and based on structure, construction and material. That has changed in my work. What has remained constant is a commitment to the erstwhile socialist aspect of the modern project.*

If one reads your articles and books, from the 1960s until the present, it seams that at the beginning of your career you saw Le Corbusier as the most revolutionary architect of the twentieth century, the most accomplished if you will. However, now I believe you would say that Alvar Aalto is the most relevant Modern architect for contemporary practice.

Aalto is the one figure from the so-called "heroic core" of the Modern Movement active before the Second World War, whose legacy is still available for further development. I think the semantic of Le Corbusier is not really available today, largely because the utopian project of the Modern Movement has been foreclosed. Aalto was always measured in his approach to the utopianism of the Modern Movement;

he was always very circumspect about the possibility and/or desirability of realizing a utopian project. The emphasis of Aalto's work on the phenomenological experience of the environment has everything to do with the human perception and the human nervous system. This side of his work is still very pertinent and critical, and thus, open to further development.

In a previous answer you mentioned that your book *Studies in Tectonic Culture* could be evaluated as a species of "operative criticism," a category used by Manfredo Tafuri to describe aspects of the work of such historians as Nikolaus Pevsner, Siegfried Giedion, Bruno Zevi and Reyner Banham, that were intended to guide design practice. Can you elaborate more on your thoughts on operative criticism?

Obviously I have indulged into operative criticism; I think this is not inconsistent with my conception of history in relation to your earlier question. I have never concealed the fact that I consider myself to be an operative critic. In that sense, I am not a historian because I am too subjective, although I don't think there is such a thing as an objective history.

How do you think your project as a historian has/will affect the discipline?

It is hard to say. Recently I was speaking about architects whose careers began with a precise, phenomenological approach and then, at a certain point, their work becomes incredibly repetitive and schematic. They are competent professionally but, the actual detailing of the work and also its formal patterning becomes a kind of easy permutation. Perhaps the digital, apart from the phenomenon of the parametric, has had a profound impact on architectural practice which encourages a kind of superficial pattern making, and in many ways this has had a reductive effect on architecture; either in terms of the figure-ground movement of the plan or in terms of the surface of the building. If you look at contemporary magazines, you will see one project after another, iterations of a domino-like distribution of pierced windows across the surface, as if that were sufficient to carry the culture of architecture forward. In my opinion this is aesthetically reductive arising out the facility of digital pattern making. In such work the plan no longer means anything nor the space within. I can't possibly exercise any influence on that kind of cultural line.

Maybe my greatest impact has been and will be on smaller work. Perhaps we could describe it as an architecture of resistance, but it can be found all over the place. You can find it everywhere but it tends not to be evident at a large scale. It is as though the large scale in itself, plus the digital, precludes this kind of refinement and articulation.

Would you say that current modes of production of large-scale architectural projects almost impede the continuation of certain aspects of the modern project that interested you?

The legacy of Mies is relevant here, since it is clear that Mies tried to come to terms with the rationalization of technology. What is significant in the work of Mies is the level of refinement it invokes, it alludes to redeeming values; an all but mystical attitude towards the refinement of rationalized technology, which is mostly something that is absent from the application of technology. m

REFERENCES

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NOTES

(1) Emil Kaufmann (1891-1953), Colin Rowe (1920-1999), Reyner Banham (1922-1988) and Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994).

(2) "In addition to teaching, I am more strictly speaking a writer on architecture rather than an architect or even an architectural historian or, for that matter, a theorist or a critic, despite the fact that these essays, with the exception of the introduction, are arranged chronologically under the successive rubrics of theory, history and criticism." (Frampton, 2002, p. 6)