

On-Site Review: Excursions into Ethnographic Architectural Criticism

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In 1958 the French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu published an account of his fieldwork in Algeria in his first book, *Sociologie de l'Algérie*.¹ This important study of the traditional social structures of Algeria included one of the first ethnographic analyses of architecture and domesticity in post-World War II society. Six years later, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition entitled “Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture”, organised by the critic Bernard Rudofsky, that provided a demonstration of the artistic, functional and cultural richness of various types of autochthonous architecture such as vernacular, anonymous and archetypal. Local and vernacular architecture was proposed as a kind of contemporary architecture, a viable alternative to the modernist architecture of the day.

Between Bourdieu’s initial intellectual forays into the contemporary social role of autochthonous architecture and “Architecture Without Architects” wide-ranging survey, there occurred a major transformation of the role of architecture in society. Architecture—having gone through a radical reappraisal at the beginning of the 20th century, rejecting tradition in favour of industry and the machine aesthetic—was starting to come to terms with the reality of how this “revolution” might apply not only to the West but to the whole world. Modern architecture as a catalyst in the transformation to a global system was confronted with a diversity of cultures and environments that challenged many of its basic principles.

This transformation was one of the first signs of a unifying global postwar culture, economy and politics. The Cold War, consumerism, high-speed transportation and the electronic revolution in media and telecommunications all contributed to the formation of a new global consciousness. No longer limited by geography, millions of people could see how those in other parts of the world lived. The communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* from 1962, described

this emerging world in terms of a “global village”. In the early 1960s, McLuhan wrote that visual, individualistic print culture would soon be brought to an end by what he described as “electronic interdependence”. In this new era, he proclaimed, humankind would move from individualism and fragmentation to a collective identity, with a “tribal base”. McLuhan described this global village in both negative and positive terms, using technological and anthropological metaphors:

Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence. [...] In our long striving to recover for the Western world a unity of sensibility and of thought and feeling we have no more been prepared to accept the tribal consequences of such unity than we were ready for the fragmentation of the human psyche by print culture.²

The global village concept drew comparisons between an emerging universal, utopian modern architecture and the variety of ways of living in traditional settings in autochthonous and vernacular architectures. While formalised modern architecture provided a vision for contemporary living, the anthropological thinking characteristic of Bourdieu’s method and the MoMA exhibition by Rudofsky exposed the contemporary realities of living for a greater number of peoples and places.

In the preface to the “Architecture Without Architects” catalogue, Rudofsky contrasted “the serenity of the architecture in so-called underdeveloped countries with the architectural blight in industrial countries”.³ In the emerging global village, “Architecture Without Architects” was a step towards a critical and ideological justification of living in the contemporary and the traditional at the same time. In this important moment in the development of modern architecture, this exhibition included the profound call to conceive of these autochthonous architectures—vernacular,

anonymous, archetypal—within a wider conception of modern architecture. The critical and popular view proposed by this anthropological critique of modern life would quickly in the mid-1960s turn into a more radical challenge to the dominant practice of modern architecture. Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*⁴ (a MoMA publication) appeared in 1966 as a foundational document that would usher in the age of the postmodern. Like Rudofsky, Venturi showed that alternatives existed in the contemporary uses of local, autochthonous architectures, especially the vernacular. In the spirit of the socially minded 1960s, vernacular architecture emerged as a counterpoint to modern architecture in a debate about the effects of the latter on how people were living.

We cannot underestimate the more general questioning of conventional notions of architecture and dwelling through autochthonous, local and vernacular building techniques and alternative ways of living posed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This theme has resurfaced in architectural theory since then, in many contexts. Among related ideas were Christopher Alexander's concept of "pattern language" of the late 1970s, and Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre's "Critical Regionalism" from 1981,⁵ further advanced by Kenneth Frampton in his essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance"⁶ in 1983 and in the reactionary "New Urbanism" movement of the 1980s. The analysis of Lagos, Nigeria, by Rem Koolhaas that appeared in his book *Mutations* in 2001 shared this fascination with the urbanised vernacular of squatter settlements.⁷ Another MoMA exhibition, "Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement" of late 2010, looks at "radically pragmatic" locally minded, socially oriented architecture, primarily in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

But perhaps one of the most important exegeses of the vernacular in contemporary life was a work outside of the Western context: Hassan Fathy's utopian vision for rural architecture in Gourni, Egypt, published in 1969 and later in English as *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*.⁸ Fathy's ideas on the vernacu-

lar, infused with a detailed ethnographic understanding, became a point of reference that we can identify in today's thinking on sustainable architecture. His architecture might not have had the widespread influence in his time that he had hoped for, but it did generate consideration of new approaches to what kind of architecture people should live in, not just in the urbanised, industrialised West but in rural and agrarian parts of the world. Fathy's ideas allowed for the emergence of a system to value these nonformal architectures as responses to the needs of contemporary habitation. In this way, his intellectual weight was also instrumental in the emergence of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, with Fathy being honoured with its Chairman's Award in the First Cycle of the Award in 1980.

With the Award, there has been a pragmatic broadening of the argument on socially minded architecture. Throughout its history, the Award has been deeply concerned with how people live in the many contexts of the Islamic world, whether urban, rural, institutional or traditional. The Award has provided meaningful architectural examples to villages and agrarian areas, and equally to airports, offices, factories, technical projects and landscapes in its wide assessment of the built environment. Today the Award vision of sustainability and advanced design is providing a way forward to solve some of the pressing issues that face not only the larger populations of Asia and Africa that are starting to undergo their version of modernisation but the Western, industrialised world as well.

Bangladesh 2010, Aga Khan Award for Architecture On-Site Review

The ethnographic experience of contemporary architecture presents a compelling conflation of old and new. Contemporary architecture, not yet worn by use, contains the hope for a new space of life and habitation. This potential of contemporary architecture gives it a utopian character, as a world visible but not yet completely formed. Contemporary architecture in traditional societies poses the challenge of how to coordinate this contemporaneity with the reality of established customs. Particularly in rural and agrarian contexts, this becomes a negotiation between the established practices of the local culture

and the forces of the contemporary. In this relationship emerges the larger question of modernity as a meaningful social practice in the lives of people around the world—how this modernity interacts with what were previously seen as small, circumscribed, isolated and “authentic” traditional societies.

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture’s review process presents a unique opportunity to understand how everyday life is synthesised around the ideas of place and modernity in the 21st century. Here we are speaking of a move past the reductionist thinking that views people who inhabit traditional places as not part of the modern world. This is an important aspect of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture’s larger task of promoting raised living standards in urban and rural settings, in places of both tradition and modernity in the contemporary Islamic world. As outlined in the Award charter, it is a process that emphasises architecture that provides for people’s physical, social and economic needs, and also responds to their cultural and spiritual expectations.

The Award gives particular attention to building schemes that use local resources and appropriate technology in an innovative way, and to projects likely to inspire similar efforts elsewhere. This is all done to meet the goal of modernisation, but within a sensitive and sustainable understanding of how people can live. Within these parameters, the Award can just as meaningfully be given to an airport terminal design based on advanced tensile architecture, the urban renewal of a city’s fabric that dates from many eras, and handmade constructions by local villagers.

To recognise these dynamics of the modern and the local as a method of architectural criticism requires a type of anthropological thinking called proximate ethnography,⁹ an understanding of how contemporary life can be formed between the modern and the traditional, advancing past defunct concepts such as the exotic and the underdeveloped. The task of proximate ethnography or an ethnography of the modern world is to see the analyst as part of the culture under analysis, in a performative way. Modernity and tradition are treated the same. Architectural criti-

cism utilising this ethnographic perspective puts the act of criticism in the same ethnological frame as the buildings and societies under analysis.

The advantage here is that the exercise is not one of an advanced global agent leading the locals but a collective act of analysis and architectural discourse. The task is both to understand the building and society under review and to think about how one’s activities as an analyst are an integral part of the process of conceiving of modern architecture. As a reviewer, one is part of a global network of architects, writers and teachers responsible for the cooperative advancement of 21st-century discourse. Stepping into the field as part of the On-Site Review, the responsibility to both represent the discourse of the Award and be one of the ones forming it becomes extremely clear.

The process of the On-Site Review is one of encounter and constant negotiation with a local culture that is part of the architectural critique of the project under review. In other words, the review has the potential to provide a crucial intermediary step in the progression of ideas from hypotheses to theories to built form. At its most basic, the review requires an assessment in situ of a building in a foreign culture. At increasing levels of complexity, the review becomes a highly charged encounter with insular societies and their difficult internal dynamics and relations, with architecture as the subject and the reviewer as a quasi authority.

For me personally, the foreign context was made legible by my history and familiarity with Islamic and traditional agrarian societies. In this way, it was partly for me an excursion into a proximate ethnography. I was involved in the everyday society of Bangladesh as an analyst and architectural critic. But at the same time, I operated as though I were a local, to better understand the uses that this architecture was having in a simple, everyday way.

This constant modulation in role and activity, especially feeling connected to the local, is an important part of the Award. Being “in the field”, inside the societies that use the contemporary architecture, gives the Award a perspective that goes

beyond the evaluation system of other architectural awards. Instead of plans and perspectives reviewed by a jury far away from the building, you have an On-Site Reviewer interacting with the local society in many ways, in many contexts. An opportunity for ethnographic architectural criticism and discourse arises constantly. The reviewer disseminates ideas to a variety of people at different points in the social strata, in diverse positions of power and influence, affecting thinking on the subject.

One important aspect of this interaction is the relationship of the On-Site Reviewer with the architects of the project. For me these were Ehsan Khan of Vitti Sthapati Brindo Ltd., architects of the Nishorgo Oirabot Nature Interpretation Centre, and Kashef Chowdhury, architect of Chandgaon Mosque—two shortlisted projects of the 2010 Award Cycle. These regional architects with global perspectives understood my predisposition to see the review as both an ethnographic and an architectural analysis. They guided me in the local culture, but were careful to allow me to experience the buildings first-hand. I was able to judge their projects architecturally, but also to see how these architects and their buildings performed technically and socially. Sometimes their interaction with the builders, clients and users became more important than the building itself. In some cases, the cooperation provided by the On-Site Review team (the architect, a local photographer/architect and a translator/architect) allowed the opportunity to move away from Western-based rational analyses altogether. Given such detailed understanding of the workings of the local society, the close relations between the Bangladeshi villagers and the team (all of Bangladeshi origin except for me) permitted us to jump into a symbolic and spiritual register, to a more narrative exploration of place, nature and habitation.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958).
- 2 Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 32.
- 3 Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964), p. 3.
- 4 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, with an introduction by Vincent Scully (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).
- 5 "The Grid and the Pathway: The Work of D. and S. Antonakakis", *Architecture in Greece 15*, 1981.
- 6 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983).
- 7 Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, Hans Ulrich Obrist, et al., *Mutations* (Barcelona: Actar, 2001).
- 8 Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
- 9 Michael Sherringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 293.



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