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The Cities' Identities between Critical Regionalism and Globalization

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Abstract

"The task of critical regionalism is to rethink architecture through the concept of region." (Tzonis & Lefaivre, 2003) The term critical regionalism, in its sense, raises several arguments in the architectural field. Critical regionalism could debate the essence of the utopian idea of international design, that every building can be placed anywhere and function with high compatibility. Critical regionalism questions the approaches used in international design; it opens up the idea that each region could have a specific characteristic that could serve function, form, and efficiency. This could also mean that each region will be distinct in the means of materials and treatments. "Critical regionalism self- consciously seeks to deconstruct universal modernism in terms of values and images which are locally cultivated, while at the same time adulterating these autochthonous elements with paradigms drawn from alien sources." (Frarmpton ,1983) Critical Regionalism does not intend to revisit history or dwell in the past, but to find a middle ground between two extremes. The universal design that the modernists strive to achieve by spearing Louis Sullivan's saying "Form follows function" wherever the building might exist, and the post modernists who celebrated ornamentation for its own sake. Globalization is definitely a benefit for designers as it expands the visual cultures; yet designers need to use this design exposure in a way that could benefit the environment and maximize the built environment's efficiency.

This paper questions the possibility to use critical regionalism in promoting a region's identity but at the same time adheres to the international developments. The aim is to explore the idea of critical regionalism applications, and whether it could relate to both international design and regional identity. Its being applied to four different interior design Master's degree student projects in Florence, Italy. The students were given a specific building in the center of Florence to redesign but there were several fixed factors. First, the building should be a hotel that relates to the identity of the city of Florence, second, the design should be minimal, third the use of literal images or direct analogies were not allowed. The data is analyzed through a comparative study between the four projects in terms of concept, analogy, color scheme, materials and level of ornamentation.

The paper represents results of this focus group of interior design students who are from different demographics with only fixed education levels' postgraduates in either interior design or architecture, and project description.

1. Introduction

The two poles of modern architecture – super modernism and the particularity of place – are clear reflections of the two poles of globalization and localization (Adam, 2012).

The ongoing conflict between visual exposure and cultural heritage in design is always intact. The rivalry between adhering to international design and enhancing the cultural belongingness has motivated many design theorists to debate and to advise how this integration could, should or should not happen.

"The global culture of design is supported by architects who study what other architects are creating, no matter where" (El Demery, 2009). Globalization can no longer be identified only as a liberative act; it has become an expression that is directly associated with a loss of cultural identity. It is given that globalization did affect us as design communities. Designers from the most diverse regions in the world could collaborate and somehow manage to create a kind of unified yet different design language between them. Globalization is definitely benefiting us, yet we need to use this design exposure in a way that could benefit the environment and maximize the built environment efficiency.

Some theorists could agree that each architectural movement is an actual act of rebellion. Regionalists believed that Modernists had lost the identity and its beauty along the way so mostly their reaction manipulated them into revisiting history. "Critical regionalists broke older forms of regionalism by rejecting absolute historicism" (Lafaivre, 2003). A break in the essence of the Regionalists' ideology became noticeable in a way that the core idea of opposing international design was argued. Regionalism became discussed as "an engagement with the global, universalizing world rather than by an attitude of resistance" (Lafaivre, 2003). At this point, the emergence of the term "Critical Regionalism" became that bridge that attempts to connect Identity with a global vision. Its strategy is to "mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the particularities of a particular place" (Frampton, 1983).

The question is could designers reach a formula where they can benefit from the globalization while adhering to the city's belongingness?

1.1 The concept of Cities' Identity in Relation to Critical Regionalism

Identities are meanings derived from feelings, experiences, belongingness, and change. They are made of history, geography, biology, collective memory, power status and religious revelations. Individuals are the ones who perceive identities according to social determinations and cultural projections that are rooted in their social structure (Castells, 1997). It is how people connect to the distinctiveness of community and place in relation to global homogenization (Adam, 2012). "Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction perceived only in the course of long spans of time. At every instant there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored" (Lynch, 1960). However, the identity of resistance can transform using all of the factors that construct the future, rather than reinvent history. "A region may develop ideas. Imagination and intelligence are necessary for both"(Frampton, 1983).

The art of building is not a simple way to offer housing, but it is a struggling effort to reproduce and develop the purposes which distinguish a certain and precise age. Any mechanical way to try to replicate these forms and get them back to life will end up by losing the essence of the life they had in the past (Lafavier, 2003).

Seeking to replicate such a buildings nowadays will betray a fake and poor imitation, and how hard the architect will work to hide this truth, failure will be the result of his efforts. The spirit of the past is the only thing that can be recaptured (Adam, 2012).

1.2 Design Standardization Against Globalization

The conflict between the global and the regional is not stimulating in itself but the real disagreement that exists in all these areas is the one between stability and instability and here lays the interest (Koolhass, 1996).

Globalization is accused to be the reason of the loss of city identity, but that can be defended because simply, the same openness to global design approaches in design enlarged the designers' capability to be engaged and be visually cultured. The standardization of design should be rejected. The term standardization in itself is against the core of identity; identity refers to uniqueness, maybe individualism and standardization disregards the essence of difference.

Defamilarization is at the heart of what distinguishes critical regionalism from other forms of regionalism and its capability to create a renewed versus an atavistic sense of place in our time. Critical regionalism a device which

makes the familiar strange and makes the recollection of a precedent critical rather than a picturesque manifestation of the past. The idea of resistance, whether political, cultural, or architectural, can only exist where there is an entrenched regime of some kind to be fought against, to be resisted. There is no such thing as a universal architecture of resistance. It is always particular, responding to the specifics of a place and time.

It is acceptable to have several approaches to its formation as long as critical regionalism will be selective to the way to reach a middle ground between accepting globalization while enhancing its use and connecting to the cultural identity without revisiting history (Zarzar, 2007).

Case Study

The following case study aims to explore the idea of critical regionalism applications, and whether it could relate to both international design and regional identity. It is applied to four different Interior Design Master's degree student projects in Florence, Italy. The students were given a specific building in the center of Florence to redesign but there were several fixed factors. First, the building should be a hotel that relates to the identity of the city of Florence, second, the design should be minimal, third the use of literal images or direct analogies were not allowed. The data is analyzed through a comparative study between the four projects in terms of concept, analogy, color scheme, materials and level of ornamentation.

The projects are analyzed in two phases:

1. Concept derived from observations

2. Transformation from the observed to the perceived

The four designers were in an interior design Master's Program, but they come from different educational backgrounds and fields of expertise. They were divided among several professions: interior design, architecture and environmental engineering. Furthermore, the comparative study will show how their background education and field experience changed their design approaches and concept formation.
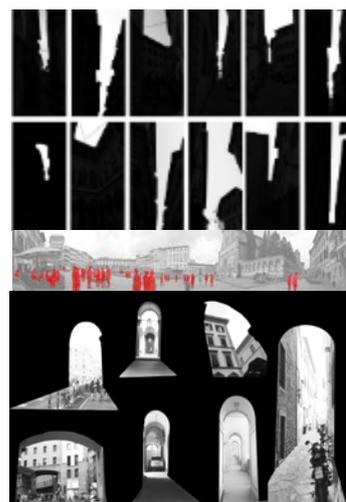
2.1. Concept Derived from Observations:

Figure1 Photo Credits to Arch. Marialena Kampani

Figure2 Photo Credits to I.D. Joy Dorkhom

The four designers observed the city and photographed what was interesting in their point of view. The four of them actually grasped the city's identity; hence their inspired photography was somehow similar. What was surprising is when they decided to translate their observations into words and feelings the expressions was different.

As shown in (figure 1), the city observation of this architect was articulated by the contrast of light and shadow, calm and intensity, reflection and roughness and finally chaos and romance. The designer attempted to even edit her own photograph to show what actually conveyed these feelings. In (figure 2), the city observation of the interior designer was communicated in a very different notion. Rather than expressing her feelings by edited photos, the designer was very poetic about the city belongingness as she started to explain her concept with this opening line, "A clear division between center and oltrarno between urban city and rural countryside. A clear crisp separation, what's more simple and clear than to represent that with a line, just a line" (Dorkhom, 2016). In (figure 3), the city observation of the engineer was expressed by stating the main urban elements that capture her attention like narrow streets, piazzas reaching clarity as the key feature of Florentine identity. It is noticeable that her observations were based on urban analysis rather than an artistic analysis and that could be due to her ba observation of the interior designer was expressed in capturing the architectural distinctiveness in Florence. That architectural analogy will be analyzed later on in her translation of perception.

Figure3 Photo Credits to Engineer Elnaz Pakzard

Figure4 Photo Credits to I.D Hagar Bar-Gil

2. Transformation from the Observed to the Perceived:

In this phase, the four participants started to translate all of their observations and expressions of the Florentine identity. Although, as stated before, the "Personally taken" photographs showed similarities but the methods and words used for expressing them were different. In addition, how they translated these observations into their project concepts made their design approaches completely different.

Figure 5 Photo Credit to Architect Marielena Kampani

As shown in (figure 5), the architect translated from all of her observations the concept of contrast, contradictions and uniqueness. The approach was mainly focused on diagonal lines which intersect and contradict each other, later on she used these intersections in dividing the main plan.

Figure6 Photo Credits to I.D. Joy Dorkhom

In (figure 6), the interior designer decided to be inspired by the duality of the Arno River which she considered a transition between the calmness and the city, she translated that by creating a line; A fine line that makes a powerful transition, despite the fact that it might be thin, but it creates a clear separation. That might take u back to the concept of critical regionalism in which it shows how the designer was inspired by the region while defamiliarizing it although the designer was not introduced to this term.

Figure 7 Photo Credits to Engineer Elnaz Pakzard

In (figure 7), the engineer used the three words she previously observed into a direct plan solving. She focused on creating tight corridors that open to vast lobbies to convey the concept of clarity translating the narrow streets into tight corridors and the Piazzas into vast lobbies.

Figure 8 Photo Credits to I.D Hagar Bar-Gil

In (figure 8), the interior designer, as mentioned before, used architectural analogies while being indirect about it. She focused on how the pipes are revealed and were visible on the buildings of Florence. She also focused on the shutters that are used abundantly on the Florentine windows.

Case Study Findings:

The concepts were different but it is very noticeable that the four designers did feel the city. They saw its distinctiveness and translated the city's identity into actual conceptual structures. If city identity is analyzed by any of the definitions mentioned in the literature review, one can easily notice how the project forced the participants in vast observations to the spirit of the city and created a thin line in which critical regionalism can

be explored.   Their expressions of how they conveyed the essence of the city in its contradictions was surprisingly different while they actually agreed on the most distinctive features of the city. The transformation from the observed to the perceived showed that although the realization of the place identity was somehow similar; the translation of the designers' perceptions varied.

Comparison between the 4 projects in terms of Anology, Color Scheme, Materials and level of ornamentation

Points of Comparison	Project 1 M. Kampani	Project 2 J. Dorkhom	Project 3 E. Pakzard	Project 4 H. Bar-Gil
Anology	Abstract concept of contrast	Abstract concept of duality and the effects of a natural typography(the arno River)	Anology to the city urbanizm (used indirectly)	Anolgy to physical architactal elements and features (used directly and indirectly)
Color Scheme	Accent Colors were implemented to complement the concept of contrast	Monochramatic colors	Monochramatic colors	Monochramatic colors
Materials	Mix of Rough and smooth maerials to complement th concept of contrast	Change in materials only in the Lines to complement the concept of duality	Smooth and neat materials to complement the concept of clarity	
Level of Ornamentation	7	8		

Conclusion

Through this comparative study, it has been shown that highlighting a city's identity is possible without using direct analogies to its history, yet at the same time capturing this identity is a difficult formula to be applied.

The restriction that was enforced on the students in preventing the use of direct analogies to history while implementing the use of a minimalistic approach opened the door to the possibility of showing a city's identity without referring back directly to its history.

Although the students were not introduced at all to the term critical regionalism, they reached a preliminary result to the design formula that can be explored further.

The identities of cities is bound to be lost in a time where the most common trend is following international design that mainly preaches the concept of 'form follows function', that's why critical regionalism can be reconsidered as a gateway to maintain a city's identity while adhering to international approaches.

Acknowledgements

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