

On Regionalism

By Charles Correa

Strange indeed that, since the beginning of time, man has used the most inert materials, like rock and stone, wood and brick, cement and steel, to express the invisible compulsions that consume him.

And yet, in our everyday existence, we seem quite far removed from such passionate concerns. At work, architects face quite commonsensical problems in a somewhat banal world. That is to say, we deal with clients who have particular requirements, budgets, time schedules and so forth. Within these parameters, we try to arrive at suitable arrangements of builtform.

But on another level, just below the surface, architects (at least some of them) seem to have access to a series of compulsive, near-mythic images. These act like powerful elixirs, transforming the drab of everyday construction into something valuable.



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But this of course is not quite the whole picture. For much below this layer of wham-O images, there is a third stratum, a far more profound deep structure, generated by the interaction of culture, aspirations, climate, and other such factors. This deep structure is the wellspring of architecture, a primordial source which underlies the middle level and which generates its compulsive imagery. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright created his Usonian houses not by raiding Cape Cod or Tudor vocabulary, but rather by his intuitive understanding of the aspirations of middle America in the mid-west. In other words, his path seems to go right through the middle layer and touch rock-bottom in the deep structure. On his way back to the surface, he brings with him the new mythic images of USONIA. Deposited at the middle level, they become accessible to all of us, forming the lifestyle of much of North American suburbia throughout this century: the two steps up to the dining area, the carport, the picture window, the open plan, and so forth.

Looked at this way, it is easy to perceive that there are in fact two different sources of Regionalism in architecture. The first consists of those architects who bounce off the middle layer. The main difference between them and the "International" stylists is that their grab-bag of wham-O images is somewhat more localised. But essentially, it is the same process.

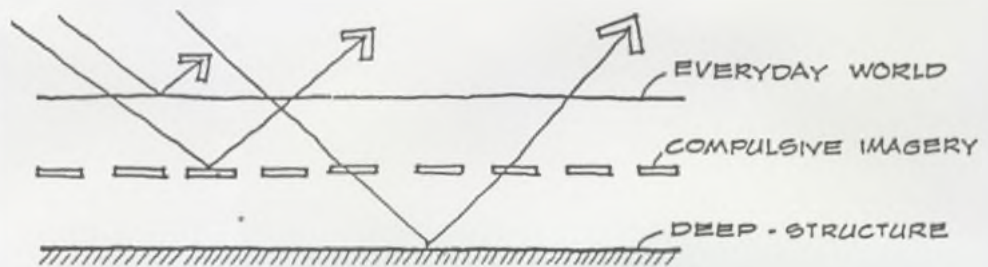
On the other hand, there is another process, quite different from the first, which also generates regionalism. This process involves reaching the deep-structure in that lowest layer. It is a far more difficult, yet rewarding, path. Such architecture does not merely transfer images (whether of local or transnational origin), but transforms them, re-inventing them so to speak. In order to understand this process we must examine the forces that generate architecture, and their crucial relationship with each other.

The first of these forces is Culture. In our model it is like a great reservoir, calm and continuous, changing only very gradually over the years. The second is Aspirations. This force can be quite different from Culture- though of course they interact continuously. Aspirations are dynamic and volatile, often quite ephemeral.

The third force acting on architecture is Climate. It is fundamentally an unchanging force. It exerts a far more primary influence on architecture than it does on any other of the arts such as music, painting, or dance. So a very thorough understanding of climate is crucial to an architect's work. It must go far beyond the merely pragmatic. For at the deep-structure level, Climate conditions Culture and its expression, its rites and rituals. In itself, Climate is the source of myth. The metaphysical qualities attributed to open-to-sky space in the cultures of India and Mexico are concomitants of the warm climate in which they exist, just as the films of Ingmar Bergman would be inconceivable without the dark brooding Swedish winters.

The fourth force acting on architecture is Technology. No other art feels its influence so decisively. Musical instruments change, but only gradually. In architecture, on the other hand, the prevailing technology changes every few decades.

Charles Correa, architect and planner, has designed buildings and townships in various parts of India, including the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Museum at the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, the National Crafts Museum in Delhi, the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur, the new State Assembly for the Government of Madhya Pradesh, Cidade de Goa in Dona Paula, the Institute of Astrophysics in Poona, as well as urban planning projects in Bombay, Bangalore and other cities of India. From 1970 - 75 he was Chief Architect for the planning of New Bombay and in 1985 was appointed Chairman of National Commission on Urbanization. Correa has taught at several universities, both in India and abroad, and is the author of *The New Landscape*. His work has been published in various architectural journals and monographs and he has received several awards and honors, including: in 1972 the Padma Shri by the President of India, in 1984 the Royal Gold Medal by the RIBA, in 1986 the Gold Medal of the Indian Institute of Architects and in 1990 the Gold Medal of the UIA (International Union of Architects). This fall he is teaching a Level III studio at MIT with Michael Brawne entitled *Alternate Paradigms*.



And each time this happens, architecture must re-invent the expression of the mythic images and values upon which it is based.

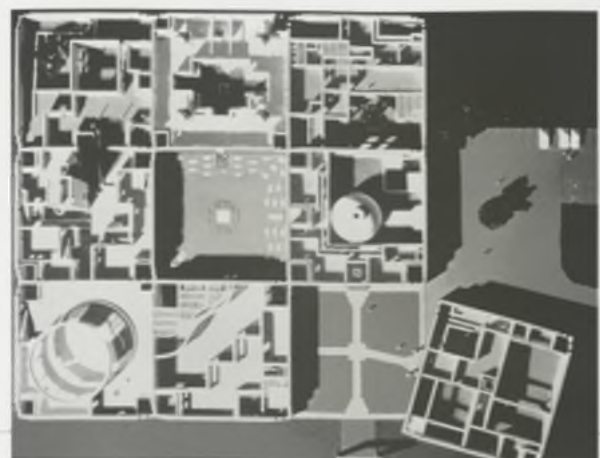
Architecture comes into being at the point of resolution of these forces. Sometimes this point changes because of a shift in the basic cultural paradigm. Changes along this axis are shared by Architecture with all the other arts. It is the frequency and decisiveness of the technological changes that are unique to architecture, and which make it such a sensitive barometer of the health and robustness of a particular society.

Take, for instance, the exquisitely corbelled masonry of the iwans of Isphahan, or the half-timbered walls of the Elizabethan cottage. When the technology changes (e.g., the stone has to be replaced by concrete, or the wood by steel), we have two choices: we can either superficially transfer the old images to the new builtform (hence the fake arches and domes we see all around us) or we can transform them, i.e. re-invent them in the new technology. Both options work, but there is a difference. The process of transfer is facile but debilitating; transformation challenges society, but renews it as well.

What do we mean by regionalism? To me, all true architecture is, by definition, regional because it becomes true only when it expresses the prime forces of Culture, Aspirations and Climate in the technology available at a particular point on this planet. Thus, in a profound sense, all the finest examples of architecture that we have experienced, from Fatehpur-Sikri at Agra and the temples of Nara to the Oak Park houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, are all regional; not because they exploit the middle layer of facile imagery, but because they make contact with the deep-structure that lies beneath. ■



The Gandhi Smarak Sangralaya, Ahmedabad



Nehru Museum, Jaipur

