
REVIEW

European Regional Modernism

Regionalism and Modernity: Architecture in Western Europe 1914–1940, Leen Meganck, Linda Van Santvoort, and Jan De Maeyer, editors, Leuven University Press, 240 pages, 2013

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In recent years, beginning with the publication in 2003 of Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis' *Critical Regionalism*, followed by my *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity and Tradition* in 2007, there has been a quiet resurgence in the discourse of architectural regionalism. Leuven University Press's *Sources of Regionalism in the Nineteenth Century* (2008) introduced the older tradition of regionalism in European thought and practice with a consideration of architecture, art, and literature in the nineteenth century. Since then activity has continued in articles and essays with the aim at documenting the longer history of this recurrent yet neglected tendency in architectural thought and practice. Publications such as Michelangelo Sabatino's *Pride and Modesty* (2010), Lejeune and Sabatino's *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean* (2010), Eric Storm's *The Culture of Regionalism* (2010), Lefaivre and Tzonis' *Architectural Regionalism in the Age of Globalization* (2012), Antonio Petrov's *New Geographies 5: The Mediterranean* (2013), and *Regionalism and Modernity* are evidence of this direction. This work has been primarily historical, covering the late nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, and for this discourse, all are welcome additions to architectural history and theory.

More likely to be attractive to other historians and scholars than designers, *Regionalism and Modernity* is a rewarding yet difficult contribution to this discourse. The specific intent of the editors is to shed light on the lesser-known architectural developments in the years between the two world wars in Europe. They achieve this through a fragmented (as is the nature of edited volumes) historiography of architecture and regionalism in France, Italy, Germany, England, and Belgium in the years between 1914 and 1940. Their specific aim is to demonstrate that architectural regionalism in the interwar period was more continuous and synthetic with modernist principles than it was in conflict, as is more commonly assumed. In my own book, *Architectural Regionalism*, I posited, based mostly on regionalism in the American context, that the relationship between modernism and regionalism could

be characterized by either conflict or maturation, and in some instances both. By conflict, I referred to figures whose discourse posited modernism and regionalism as antithetical (one progressive, the other retrograde). By maturation, I referred to the work and writings of architects such as Walter Gropius, who sought to reconcile the best characteristics of an emerging modern architecture (functionality, anti-historicism, embrace of emancipatory technology) with local conditions and understanding – resulting in a regional modernism. In *Regionalism and Modernity*, a more full and European perspective is presented that suggests that in Europe, maturation was the dominant tendency, but full of and informed by a greater variety of issues than in the United States. The editors assert that regionalism in European countries was a 'strategy for ensuring continuity within a modernizing society which compensates for the increasing loss of landscape and tradition' (8). But the story contributed by the volume as a whole is more complex.

Regionalism and Modernity, as an edited volume, is a thorough, detailed, and ultimately uneven account due to the diversity of authors and the accompanying differential coverage of their respective topics and deployment of terminology. It comprises eleven chapters, with six devoted to Belgian history, two to events in France, and the remainder with one each on regionalist efforts in Britain, Italy, and Germany. The most comprehensive and best written are the first chapter, by Jean-Claude Vigato, which covers regionalism in France as manifest in debates among writers, architects, and critics, including Vaillatas, Clozier, Umbdenstock, Mauclair, and Le Corbusier; the fourth chapter, by editor Leen Meganck, which discusses Belgian regionalism well enough to serve as a micro-cosmic case study for the debates, dilemmas, and developments across all of western Europe; Vanessa Berghe's contribution (chapter 10), which presents regionalism in Britain via the work of Oliver Hill, who, like William Wurster and Harwell Hamilton Harris in the US, was both prolific and influential in his time yet forgotten in subsequent historiography; and Michelangelo Sabatino's contribution (chapter 11), which reveals the regionalist tendencies in Italian Rationalism, Neo-Rationalism, and the affinity for *Mediterraneità*, or Mediterranean-ness.

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There is much in common between the American and European contexts of architecture and regionalism. However, Europe during this time was marked by events and reactions that revise, reframe, and give architectural regionalism in the European context a distinctive character. These included the rise of various factional nationalisms, large-scale urban migrations, the displacement and traumas associated with world wars, post-war reconstruction, and the rapid modernization of work and lifestyle, which affected all cultures. As such, Europe provided a differentiated but fertile ground for the regional and modernist debates that go beyond those familiar to an American audience. Taken together the events between and including the two world wars provide a more serious basis for regionalist and modernist debates, leaving them less about aesthetics and more about meaning and cultural and collective identity.

Interwar regionalism in the U.S., by contrast, was primarily a cultural and political movement mounted by intellectuals and artists, who sought to preserve the diversity of America's regions and derive inspiration from the diversity of language, art, geographies, and cultures found in America's many regions. It was also, to a degree, a reaction against the rising commercialism and consumerism that accompanied the emerging metropolitan culture and the hegemony over taste and quality that appeared to be becoming centralized in the so-called cultural capitals of New York and Los Angeles. In Europe, the regionalist debate shared some of these concerns of the American regionalists but was often also part of nation-building or nationalist agendas. European regionalisms, as presented here, often hinged on racial, ethnic, or national distinctions that contributed to the wars, racism, and ethnic cleansing. To these tendencies, architecture in various European nations was not neutral but often played a rather significant role in cultural affairs. The chapter by Johan Van den Mooter, on German reconstruction in Belgium, illustrates both the absurdity and the seriousness of architectural regionalism in Europe. Van den Mooter documents the German attempt to rebuild the very same Belgian towns they had earlier destroyed, while later occupying them, during World War I. Their efforts to rebuild were both to pacify and to correct – with pacification manifest in reconstruction efforts that utilized regional Belgian detailing and materials, but which also included 'correct' German 'standards' as a kind of architectural colonialism/imperialism. Put more gently, as Van den Mooter states, 'the German plan fitted in with a broader propagandistic framework ... [with the] intention to strengthen ties with the occupied region by such means as architecture' (70).

Regionalism, the collected accounts make clear, was also deployed for more serious reasons as well. As a discourse, regionalism promotes respect and attention for the particularity of places (or regions), including its climate, geography, physical features, shared traditions, locally available materials, building techniques, and other ways of life. Regionalism was an attractive tendency for people undergoing the serious trauma of war, as many

destroyed communities required a kind of healing that took the form of reconstruction. At the same time, regionalism also related well to the variety of societal reform movements, mostly anti-urban, whose proponents sought to reconnect with the rural landscape and vernacular architecture and who were uncomfortable with the pace and dis-embedding character of modernity. For some, the attraction to regionalism was antipathy towards the rootless urban lifestyle that 'promoted' crime and avarice and a desire to connect to an idealized agrarian lifestyle. For others, it was felt that vernacular architecture not only represented pragmatic and well-adapted buildings, but also ties to past traditions, building techniques, and materials. In this context, early modernist buildings, stripped of details and ornament, represented a kind of threat and at best, an expression of placelessness, otherness, and rootlessness – at its worst, 'Bolshevism'. The quote from Alexander Kropholler in chapter 4 is particularly insightful:

So we prefer to draw the contrast between Traditionalism and Internationalism, in other words between proud independence and thoughtless leveling, between the individual and the mass, ... and between an objectivity that is permanent and New Objectivity. After the turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s when many of us bowed down before the international Jew, ... we once again worship our own pan-Dutch blood... Nothing is so effortless as this 'International architecture'. (83)

Regionalism and Modernity is a valuable contribution to the discourse that will prove useful for both U.S. and European audiences. For the U.S. audience, it situates regionalism, modernism, historicism, and eclecticism within a social and political framework, while also demonstrating architecture's cultural and artistic relevance. Rather than simply a debate about style (regionalism, modernism, colonial, or neo-Tuscan?), as is often the case in the discussions about architectural style in the U.S., events in Europe demonstrate a closer and deeper relationship between culture, meaning and architecture. Of value to both audiences is the presentation of how regionalist and modernist concepts played out in each country. The regionalist response in France was based in a resistance to central state authority and to a sense of cultural hegemony associated with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In Germany, the regional impetus was ethnic and nationalistic as regions retained much of their political autonomy. And in Spain, although not documented here but in Eric Storm's fine volume mentioned above, regionalism was an extension of the pre-existing and valued historical-regional differences, evidenced by the Catalan *modernista* movement. European readers should find these revelations somewhat familiar and yet of renewed importance with the advent of the European Union, which has challenged not only regional differences vis-à-vis the nation, but also nations within the EU as a whole. The scholarship included in this volume is, as such, a contribution to contemporary dis-

course inside and outside architecture while also deepening architectural historiography.

However, the volume is not without its flaws. Most problematic for readers is the overall structure of the volume. The account is overly Belgium-centric and includes well-intentioned chapters overly laden with references documenting the country's reconstruction under occupation, traditionalism, regional banks, and the work of Clemens Trefois. These accounts, which are potentially interesting and capable of contributing to a very detailed case study, instead weigh the book down in unnecessary detail without contributing to the overall intent. The volume also suffers from a lack of a consistent definition or use of the word regionalism; it is often conflated in the book with eclecticism, traditionalism, nationalism, and neo-vernacularism, with all of which it shares some features, but remains distinct. This reader wishes the editors had exerted a more firm hand in this regard. Clarity and a greater awareness of the flaws and promise of architectural regionalism are key in contributing to the continuance of this significant architectural discourse. These issues aside, *Regionalism and Modernity* is a welcome addition to the discourse and a welcome addition to any library.

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