

INTERVIEW

On the Grounds of Modern Architecture: An Interview with Kenneth Frampton

Thomas McQuillan

In connection with the publication of Kenneth Frampton's *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form*, Thomas McQuillan conducted an interview in March of 2016 with Frampton to discuss the book's background and the implications publication has for contemporary architecture. The book consists of close comparative analyses of 28 modern buildings, two by two, in order to interrogate their spatial, constructive, envelopmental, and programmatic characteristics. Prefaced by a synoptic note, with a highly concentrated exposition of the history of modern architecture, and building on his reading of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, the book seeks the meaning of architecture in the tectonic — the way it is built — in more than just the spaces it affords and the images that it projects. Frampton shares the history of his ideas on tectonics and the fragility of the modern project in today's neoliberal climate.

About Kenneth Frampton

Kenneth Frampton is the Ware Professor of Architecture at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University and a leading voice in the history of modernist architecture. In the 1970s, he was instrumental in the development of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York and a co-founding editor of its magazine *Oppositions*. His essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' of 1983 was seminal in defining architectural thought throughout the 1980s, and his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980; revised 1985, 1992 and 2007) and *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995) are cornerstones of his work.

About Thomas McQuillan

Thomas McQuillan is an architect and head of the Institute of Architecture at The Oslo School of Architecture and Design. He received his degree in architecture at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 1991 and his PhD from The Oslo School of Architecture and Design in 2006. He is a practicing architect who manages interdisciplinary design teams in large-scale projects and designs small-scale houses.

Introduction

In his *Studies in Tectonic Culture*, Kenneth Frampton appended an epilogue entitled 'The Owl of Minerva' (Frampton 1995) a reference to Hegel's image that the 'the owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering', or that a period of thought can

first understand its own condition as it is drawing to a close. There, Frampton struck a somber tone, noting that 'architects are confronted today by a crisis of value comparable to that experienced by Gottfried Semper in 1851', and concluding that 'over the last century and a half cultural devaluation has greatly increased its scope, and its main effect has now shifted to the "spectacular" side of the economic cycle'. But despite, or perhaps because of, this note of foreboding, *Studies in Tectonic Culture* has become a central point of reference in current architectural discourse and a rallying cry for those who have sought to reinvigorate the work of architecture with a real constructional and material presence.

Frampton's recent *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form* (2015) reenters this fray in a concentrated and specific form, through the close comparative analysis of 28 modern buildings, two by two, in order to interrogate their spatial, constructive, envelopmental, and programmatic characteristics. The pairings arise out of shared programs — whether dwellings, office buildings, or museums. But this common programmatic genesis throws into sharp contrast the architectonic asymmetry that the particular spatial and constructive embodiment produces. The comparative method is well suited to reveal the underlying ideas and solutions that each case presents, as well as to explode the notion that the modern project in architecture is somehow uniform.

Among the cases are striking pairings, such as that of Terragni's Casa del Fascio and Asplund's Göteborgs Rådhus, which despite sharing a politically informed civic programs and being realized only a year apart (in 1936 and 1937, respectively) represent nearly diametrically opposed conceptions of the political animal. Both are four-storied, six-bayed cubic forms; both explore the interplay between surface and expressed structure; both

display a balanced asymmetry; both express in an exceedingly subtle manner through facade geometry the internal configuration of their inner spaces. But while the Casa del Fascio is tightly rational in the arrangement of its spaces and crisply precise in its pattern of circulation, Göteborgs Rådhus reveals a gentler and more refined arrangement of organically inflected geometries and a more meandering and placid movement through its spaces. While the Casa stands apart in a balanced dialogue with the Cattedrale di Como, Asplund's Rådhus is a carefully integrated extension to Nicodemus Tessin's 1672 City Hall Building.

The analysis of the cases is introduced in Frampton's introduction to *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture*, 'Synoptic Note', one of the most concentrated expositions of the history of modern architecture I have ever read, as well as building on his reading of Hannah Arendt's 1954 *The Human Condition*. Frampton seeks the meaning of architecture in the tectonic – or the way that it is built – not only in the spaces it affords or the images that it projects. In order to gain a deeper background on these ideas and to relate *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture* to the current architectural scene, I spoke recently to Professor Frampton in his Columbia University office.

The Interview

McQuillan: The notion of the tectonic seems to be very central to your understanding of how architecture works. It seems natural to trace this idea back to Semper and the tectonic as one of his *Four Elements* (Semper 1989). But it seems as though your use of the term is much more expansive, including all of the Semperian elements. What does the tectonic mean to you?

Frampton: *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995) arose out of four lectures I gave at Rice University in Texas in the 1980s, the Craig Francis Cullinan Lectures. The four lectures dealt with the work of four architects: Auguste Perret, Jorn Utzon, Louis Kahn, and Mies van der Rohe. Structural expression was very important to all four, but in different ways. And the reason I wanted to look at these four was the ongoing difficulty we were already experiencing with the grounding of architecture. The notion of the tectonic is also related to my reading of Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaivre, who coined the term 'critical regionalism' in the article 'The Grid and the Pathway', published in *Architecture in Greece* in 1981 (Tzonis and Lefaivre 1981), in which they discuss the work of the two Greek architects, Aris Konstantinidis and Dimitris Pikionis, and formulate a critical regionalism to disassociate the term from the demagogic regionalism of the Third Reich.

I was very inspired by their idea of critical regionalism and wanted to develop it in contrast to the universal suburbia in the States at that time, where despite the vast continental expanse, the same suburbia was everywhere. In my essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' (Frampton 1983), I asserted that there was a fundamental opposition between the tectonic and the scenographic in architecture, where the tectonic is the fundamental autonomy of the structure, and the scenographic is the representational aspect of the image. Semper's model of the four elements grows out of an anthropological paradigm, but he

also expresses an ambivalence to the scenographic aspect of the mask or *bekleidung*. The scenographic, theatrical aspect was crucial to him.

This led me to distinguish between the ontological and the representational tectonic. The Doric column may be cited as an example of this, in which the flutes finally bring into being the entirety of the column; otherwise, it's just a series of cylindrical stones stacked on top of each other. I find this concept to be extremely rich, with regard to the detailing of built form. Alvar Aalto, I think, was very aware of this, even if he never formulated the issue in terms of representation. In contrast today, the spectacular image has taken over completely.

This brings me to Guy Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1990; originally published in French in 1988) in which we find the amazing passage that reads as follows:

It is indeed unfortunate that human society should encounter such burning problems just when it has become materially impossible to make heard the least objection to the language of the commodity; just when power – quite rightly because it is shielded by the spectacle from any response to its piecemeal and delirious decisions and justifications – believes that it no longer needs to think; and indeed can no longer think. (Debord 1990: 38)

McQuillan: Indeed, in the current global scene which celebrates 'starchitects' it seems as though we're in a period of a technological sublime, or a mediated architecture, that has little truck with the notion of the regional. And I imagine that there's going to be a reaction similar to the one that spurred 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' in which architecture can become grounded again, grounded in something local, something meaningful, something which has some kind of moral purpose.

Frampton: Well, most of our star architects are surely spectacular, are they not? And that spectacular quality means that, from my point of view, they're not grounded at all, and they're not interested in being grounded, and indeed their success depends on their not being grounded. Terry Eagleton has recently written a book with the title *Culture and the Death of God* (Eagleton 2014), in which according to the gloss, he argues that today one has to resist the commodification of culture.

McQuillan: Well, culture can't be commodified, and still retain its meaning as culture, can it?

Frampton: Exactly. I think Clement Greenberg's essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (Greenberg 1939) is relevant here, in which he put forth the argument that the task of the arts is to resist their reduction to pure entertainment, and that the autonomy of each is the only way of resisting this commodification, although he doesn't use this word. But he posits the idea of having to sustain a 'holding operation', in order to protect culture against all this, although this is quixotic by definition.

McQuillan: In your 'Synoptic Note on the Modern Movement 1923–1980', the introduction to your book (Frampton 2015), you introduce a three-part structure, a

sort of triad, that you employ to structure your examination of the development of modern architecture. Against the dialectic opposition of Classical and Romantic, or the type-based against the expressive, you suggest that a triad of the classic, the technological and the vernacular provides a better framework to understand the way architecture developed in the 20th century.

Frampton: Well, this is taken from Le Corbusier, as you know. I was influenced by the map of his *Voyage d'orient*, his 1911 journey to the east (Frampton 2015: 9). He doesn't use the word 'classic', however. Instead he uses the word 'culture'. It is I who translated it or rather misrepresented it as classic. It seems to me that he touched on something which would be present in his own work, namely, the existence and continuity of the vernacular, of *building* instead of architecture. We see this in Adolf Loos' essay 'Architecture' of 1910 (Loos 1985) that describes a pre-aesthetic world in which he asks the peasant, 'Is this a beautiful roof or an ugly roof?' And he says, he doesn't know. It's the roof his father built, and the roof his grandfather built. It is beyond the aesthetic. So the vernacular is, in this sense, a referent lying within the heroic period of the modern movement.

I still think it's astonishing that Le Corbusier's last purist villa is 1929, and in 1931, he projects the Maison Errazuriz in Chile, which is completely something else. You could say that his Maison de Week-end of 1935 is a synthesis of all three aspects in the use of glass blocks, plate glass, within a steel frame, and the concrete shell-vault, while the vernacular is present via the rubble stone walling. So the classicism of the purist villas is weakening.

McQuillan: It seems to me that Le Corbusier's understanding of technology changed during his trip because after his dismay at the flattening of culture by mechanical processes in Germany, he arrives at Athens and upon seeing the Parthenon calls it a *machine terrible*. I think that this is the first time he makes the connection between the classical and the technological.

Frampton: Yes, along with the classical entablature being compared to the profiles of a valve in an automobile.

McQuillan: Or indeed architecture as a machine for producing in you an emotion or sensation.

Frampton: Yes. An evocative but slightly confusing metaphor focusing on the idea of the perfection of the automobile, hence the parallel comparison of a Humber versus a Delage, and Pæstum versus the Acropolis.

McQuillan: The idea that technology is an evolutionary process.

Frampton: However, a crisis unfolds between 1923, when it's at its evolutionary peak when he's working with Ozenfant, and 1931, when the Maison Errazuriz occurs. For him, the myth of industrial perfection is no longer quite believable. And this cultural shift affects his painting as well.

McQuillan: Maybe the seeds of this are even a little earlier, in his own apartment, where the vault emerges for the first time, and he leaves the rubble party-wall unrendered in his studio. As well as the *Objets à réaction poétique* that he collected on his journeys, populating the space, so he's living the experience together with his wife and realizing the limitations of the purist idea. He's attained a sense of

perfection in the Villa Savoye, but he's realizing there's so much more.

Frampton: Well, he begins to have doubts about the desirability of industrial perfection. So he tries to distance himself from it. His trip to Brazil at this time is also a decisive emotional experience for him. He has the sense that, as opposed to Europe, South American civilization could provide a fertile, more primitive ground.

McQuillan: A place where the past doesn't need to be cleared away.

Frampton: Right. And because it's so vital, in contrast to Europe which appears increasingly exhausted. One may compare this to Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856, where the European ornament, rendered throughout in ochre, is compared to the ornament of the 'other', which is brilliantly illuminated. As if the only possible revitalization will be through the 'other', not through Europe.

McQuillan: This is clear in Le Corbusier's interest in the primitivism, and the exhibition that he hosted in his apartment in the early 1930s of primitive art, together with Léger and others.

Frampton: Well, this shift away from the West was already evident in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* of 1916, and clearly there is a similar impact of the African on European art and music, and of course there is an afro basis latent in Brazilian culture, not to mention his transatlantic meeting with Josephine Baker.

McQuillan: There's a rather interesting passage in the book where you say,

Today, however we still may assume an ideologically progressive approach to post-modern architectonic form via a sensitive response to context, climate, topography and material combined with the self-conscious generation of a place-form as a political-cum-cultural space of appearance'. (Jones 1987: 17)

This seems to suggest that architecture as a *public* form can somehow draw from the well of postmodernism a valid approach to architecture. Not a break with modernism, but a redefinition of its tenets, so that the kind of critical distance that postmodernism introduces provides a much-needed resistance to the commoditization of architecture and its sense of globalized conformity and compliance.

Frampton: Well, if you mean by postmodernism a style, then surely we've moved passed that. But if one means the modern project, as a liberative socialist modern project, it is surely very fragile today, and in this regard I think it can be said that we are unavoidably in a postmodern condition. If we associate the modern with the enlightenment, which acquired a particular energy and inevitability after the First World War, then we can see that this encountered a difficult moment with the Spanish Civil War and then the Second World War.

I now have the task of writing the fifth edition of my *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, and the only way I can do this is to add another part to the existing three. The fourth part, which was previously just a chapter, will now be

called 'World Architecture'. There is very varied diverse production worldwide which has a great intensity and richness.

That sentence you mentioned earlier is related to my earlier reaction which produced my 1983 essay 'Towards a Critical Regionalism' that appeared in Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. I haven't completely disavowed this thesis, but I'd rather not use the term 'postmodern' any more, even though in this case it refers quite directly to the idea of critical regionalism as this was developed in the 1983 essay.

McQuillan: You suggest in the 'Philosophical Excursus' in the introduction to the book that your critical method with respect to the analysis of the case studies is based on your reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, that is to say, her distinction between 'work' and 'labor', and the corresponding character of public and private spaces. How does Arendt's thesis underlie your view of architecture?

Frampton: I just have to confess that I'll never recover from the thesis of her book. It was a total revelation about many things at once, like the idea of a spatial hierarchy, which maybe I could never articulate before, i.e. the relation between the public and the private, which determines much of the analysis in these case studies. From this I also develop the idea that the subject is formed to some extent by the space and that the 'space of appearance' allows the subject to come into being in this sense. The subject – both as a unitary subject, but also as a collective, family, group. So that the space itself, the articulation of hierarchy of space, is itself significant, that the meaning is built in into what the space can induce – not in a behavioristic sense that 'this space will produce this behavior' – but in the sense that the space is an availability which may be consummated fully by the being.

Arendt's distinction between the public and the private corresponds to the two definitions of the word architecture. In the Oxford English Dictionary, these are: 1) 'the erection of edifices for human use', and 2) 'the action and process of building'. Process aligns with Arendt's idea that labor is process, while work can create something which is both memorable and durable. But what's beautiful about this concept is that it opens to different degrees of expression in a work between something that is commemorative or symbolic, and other parts, even in the same building, which are much less so, and this makes possible a great range of expression.

McQuillan: I found very beautiful this sentence where you paraphrase Arendt:

In this regard with respect to memory, the *homo faber* hypothetically creates a world that is not only useful and durable, but also beautiful and memorable, as opposed to the *animal laborans* who in the conviction that life is the highest good, seeks only to lengthen the span of life and make the act of living easier and more comfortable. (Frampton 1983: 24)

It's incredibly precise with regard to its definition of power as something embedded in the memory. Such precision is fascinating in Arendt, given that in your search for the ontological, you might easily have gone back to Heidegger, whose sentences are often so muddy. Nonetheless,

it seems that Arendt's idea of appearance can be traced back to Heidegger's idea of truth as unconcealment.

Frampton: And I think you can trace the same idea in Semper, in his notion of concealing and revealing, which clearly embodies a latent erotic aspect. However, Arendt argues in her final chapter, 'The Victory of the *Animal Laborans*', that labor is all-pervasive today and that we consume our houses and cars like fruits of the earth which will perish if they are not immediately eaten.

McQuillan: You mention that Arendt's work presages the commodification of the environment, and you say that this is of particular consequence for architecture and sustainability inasmuch as it categorically opposes a state of affairs in which the environment is constantly on the verge of being overwhelmed by the proliferation of 'unrelated, amortizable free-standing objects'.

Frampton: If the sustainability is not cultural, then it remains very fragile. You can't simply depend on a technological fix, a LEED standard or whatever. But durability itself is already a crucial form of sustainability, although it is somehow seen as disconnected. However, there is an aspect to commodification which wants to screen out all of this. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry beautifully puts it – and I quote him in the front of *Studies in Tectonic Culture* – 'We don't ask to be eternal beings. We only ask that things do not lose all their meaning'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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