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UNEARTHED GOLDEN NUGGET: AUSTRALIA IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE SINCE 1900

In his Modern Architecture since 1900 (1982 ff.) William J.R. Curtis attempts to present a "balanced, readable overall view of the development of modern architecture from its beginning until the recent past" and to include the architecture of the non-western world, a subject overlooked by previous histories of modern architecture. Curtis places authenticity at the core of his research and uses it as the criterion to assess the historicity of modern architecture. While the second edition (1987) of Curtis's book appeared with just an addendum, for the third edition (1996) he undertook a full revision, expansion and reorganisation of the content. The new edition, it will be posited, does present a more 'authentic' account of the development of modern architecture in other parts of the world, presenting a comprehensive view of Australian architecture.

Compared to the additions and modifications of other post-colonial examples, there is scant difference in Curtis' account of Australian modern architecture between the first (1982) and the third (1996) editions. Even in the third edition (1996) the main reference to Australian modern architecture is confined to the Sydney Opera House as well as a brief commentary of the work of Harry Seidler, Peter Muller, Peter Johnson, Rick Leplastrier and Glenn Murcutt. In the years separating the two editions, regionalism in architecture was debated and framed in different ways by Paul Rudolph, Kenneth Frampton and Curtis, among others. In analysing the absence of Australian architecture as a 'golden' example of regionalism, this paper presents a critical overview of Curtis' understanding of the notion of an 'authentic' regionalism.

William J.R. Curtis's *Modern Architecture since 1900* aimed to bridge a gap detected in previous histories of modern architecture.¹ First published in 1982, the book's life, its editions and reprints, is unusual. A second edition appeared in 1987 with a preface and an addendum entitled 'The Search of Substance: Recent World Architecture (1987).' Almost a decade after it first appeared, Curtis published the final third edition in 1996. Instead of extending the epilogue, its content was massively revised, expanded and redesigned prior to the release of the third edition of *Modern Architecture since 1900*. While other histories of modern architecture were merely updated with extra chapters, Curtis added nine chapters to the original three parts of *Modern Architecture since 1900* and transformed the addendum into a whole new part. The new edition, it will be posited, does present a more 'authentic' account of the development of modern architecture in other parts of the world and a carefully constructed narrative of Australian architecture, mostly based on Harry Seidler and the Sydney Opera House. Between 1982 and 1996, in the years separating the first and the final editions, regionalism in architecture was debated and framed in different ways by Paul Rudolph, Kenneth Frampton and Curtis, among others. In analysing the absence of Australian architecture as a 'golden' example of regionalism, this paper presents a critical overview of Curtis's understanding of the notion of 'authentic' regionalism.

Before comparing the account of Australian modern architecture in the 1982 and 1996 editions, it is important to present certain definitions. Firstly, Curtis defines architecture as an art and modern architecture as "an invention of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" and a reaction against revivals.² In his opinion modern architects did not reject history nor tradition, but the superficial reuse of it that appeared in the early nineteenth century. Secondly, Curtis justifies the need for *Modern Architecture* discussing that "the historian who sets out to write a history of modern architecture will be describing and interpreting traditions which have not yet come to an end".³ Curtis believes that modern architects founded a tradition of their own in constant transformation: a modern tradition, "neither monolithic nor static" which encompasses variety in regions and in levels of quality.⁴ *Modern Architecture* is meant to bridge a gap detected by Curtis in previous histories, the aim being to present a "balanced, readable overall view of the development of modern architecture from its beginnings until the recent past."⁵

Thirdly, Curtis wrote *Modern Architecture* in the midst of "passing intellectual fashions" aiming at a return to a more solid philosophical ground and to basic principles.⁶ This return to basic principles includes a certain sense of universalism, one of the values of modern architecture and continues to be reinterpreted as preventing the development of modern architecture from being historically simple. Lastly, Curtis considers that authenticity is what really counts while 'modernity' can become a distraction. Authenticity is defined as "that nebulous quality which confers symbolic and formal vitality on even a well-worn formula."⁷ In summary, authenticity is a complex analytical tool that serves Curtis as justification of his choices and rejections and that helps understand Curtis's theoretical framework at that time.

Australia in *Modern Architecture since 1900*.

In the first edition's index 'Australia' appears twice, 'Sydney' once and there are four references to the 'Sydney Opera House'. The opera house is mentioned in the addendum to the second edition as a clear influence to Fumihiko Maki's Municipal Gymnasium in Fujisawa. In the definitive third edition, there are no changes regarding the opera house and there are a couple of new references to 'Australia'. This part of the text discusses the differences in the account of Australian architecture between the first edition and the third definitive editions. Australia is considered, together with India, as an example of a country whose "modern architecture had to begin from scratch"⁸. Curtis's sources on the arrival of modern architecture in Australia are, in 1982, D.L. Johnson and Robin Boyd.⁹ Surprisingly, in the 1996 edition, he adds J.M. Freeland's book as a source, a book published in 1968.¹⁰

Before moving on to Harry Seidler, Curtis briefly mentions Walter Burley Griffin as introductory of Wrightian influences in Australia and discusses the particularities regarding the Aboriginal population and the debates on the problem of an Australian cultural identity. First, it is especially interesting how Curtis changes the word 'indigenous' in the first edition (p. 258) to 'Aboriginal' in the third edition (p. 503) and the use of the word 'tension' to refer to the Australian tradition (or lack of it) complicated "by the relatively recent arrival of Europeans and by the fact that the Aboriginal population expressed its ideas through other means than permanent buildings."¹¹ Second, Australia is considered as one of the countries asserting themselves after colonialism, as some Third World countries, where regional architectural tendencies ended up frequently allied to nationalism.¹²

Curtis presents Harry Seidler as responsible for introducing universalizing ideas and imitations of East Coast American architectural language in Australia as a result of his cosmopolitan formation. Seidler makes only slight adjustments to this language, which in the author's opinion is evidence of his uncompromising stance and strong modernist position. Curtis supports his criticism of Paul Rudolph, who was also part of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, like Seidler, and also one of the critics theorising regionalism at that time, like Curtis. Curtis includes how, in Rudolph's opinion, the Seidler House of 1948 is "the Harvard house incarnate transferred to Sydney without any modification whatsoever."¹³ In his own essay on regionalism, Rudolph poses that it "is one way toward that richness in architecture which other movements have enjoyed and which is lacking today."¹⁴

Curtis briefly mentions Peter Muller and his 'modern regionalism', Peter Johnson and his brutalist ideology and Bill Lucas when referring to the casualness of a new suburban way of life in Australia. Their work embodied, according to Curtis, an attempt at producing a new Australian architecture. Curtis introduces the notion that at that time Australian modern architecture ran from internationalism to a 'species of regionalism' and that urban society in the country - similar to that in Latin America as opposed to Japan - had a more automatic affinity with the Western understanding of modernity. Curtis's source in the 1982 edition for ideas behind houses in the Sydney area is Jennifer Taylor.¹⁵ In 1996, Curtis adds a paper by Winsome Callister published in *Transition* and his own discussions with Gruzman and Johnson in Sydney 1980-1.¹⁶

The Sydney Opera House is, according to Curtis, more a result of the Scandinavian tradition and its influence in Utzon's design than a product of Australian architecture. The main description and analysis of the building appears in a chapter that in all editions of *Modern Architecture* is called 'Alvar Aalto and the Scandinavian Tradition'. Here Curtis focusses more on Utzon's design than on the actual result, giving more importance to the aims behind the section than to Arup's structural solution. There are three main ideas in Curtis's discussion on this iconic building: its originality, its symbolism and its significance. Firstly, the Opera House is considered a prototype and regarded for its newness, as are most works of art, with limited sources or analogies. Secondly, Curtis agrees with Philip Drew in his *Third Generation* and with Utzon himself in considering the building as a modern cathedral, consecrating its symbolism to a "supremely important national art."¹⁷ Thirdly, the choice of this building as an icon of the second half of the twentieth century architecture was, according to Curtis, in a sense, "premature".¹⁸ At the time this choice was made by Sigfried Giedion and other historians, it was not clear how buildable Utzon's design was.

According to Giedion, one of the aims of the third generation of modern architects was the transformation of ancient monumentality. It does not come as a surprise that the next reference to the Opera House appears in the chapter on Louis I. Kahn and the 'challenge' of monumentality, together with Hans Scharoun's Philharmonie in Berlin as abstractions of classicism that created a new monumentality. In the chapter on the 'Crises and Critiques in the 1960s', Curtis understands the Sydney Opera House together with Kenzo Tange's Japanese town halls, as new civic monuments. The Sydney Opera House, as a powerful image, exemplifies the reflection with which Curtis ends the text in 1982, or the third part in the third edition, without changing his position. In the case of the Sydney Opera House, Curtis's main sources are Giedion and the 1967 edition of *Space, Time and Architecture* and Utzon's own writings in *Zodiac*. In 1982, Curtis claims that little had been written on Utzon, who, in 1996 "is an architect who evades categories, and who still awaits an appropriate historical assessment."¹⁹

Apart from the above-mentioned differences between the first and third editions of *Modern Architecture* regarding Australia there are two main additions in the content of the third edition, which relate to Burley Griffin and to Glenn Murcutt. Burley Griffin's plan for the new capital city was "an organic conception blending a non-authoritarian monumentality with a dispersed garden city", while Newman College in Melbourne was "a hybrid of modern skeletal thinking, abstracted Gothic motifs, and vaguely geological metaphors."²⁰ Curtis's source on Burley Griffin is James Birrell.²¹

At the other end of the twentieth century, Curtis includes Australia in his account of the universal and the local: landscape, climate and culture. It is important to understand that Curtis wrote the book in the midst of the debates on post-modern architecture and approaches to history. One of the aims of Curtis's book was to demonstrate that modern architecture is not the rootless phenomenon that previous historiography has presented with a Western bias.

According to Curtis, regionalism was a notion, in 1996, which did no justice to the developments it tried to characterise, as it could imply a sense of provinciality or periphery. That is why Curtis uses the expression 'blend of different universalism', implying a new polarity between regional and universal. Examples of these ideas are, on the one hand, the Australian domestic architecture of the 1970s and 1980s and Rick Lepastrier (who Curtis met and with whom he discussed Australian architecture in the early 1980s), and on the other, the response to different climatic zones given by Glenn Murcutt and his notion of 'legible landscape', that links him back to the Aboriginal Australians.²² Curtis's sources on Murcutt are Fromonot, Leon Paroissien and Michael Griggs and Murcutt himself is his source on 'legible landscape' together with Elizabeth M. Farrelly and Philip Drew.²³

It appears that Curtis had, at least, problems 'locating' the content about Australia in the first edition of the book, both thematically and chronologically. However, as it has been shown, even having admitted to visiting the country, Curtis focusses his attention on the work of émigré architects and on the import of modern forms. His general reflections on regionalism, universalism and landscape are supported by brief descriptions of few examples. But what it is even more interesting is how the brave judgments of Australian complexities in the search for a national identity were suppressed when preparing the definitive edition of *Modern Architecture*.

The "Hazy" Notion of Regionalism

During the period of time separating the first and the third editions of *Modern Architecture*, and especially in the late 1980s, not only Curtis but also other critics and historians such as Kenneth Frampton and Paul Rudolph published their reflections on the notion of regionalism. Paul Ricœur's formulation of the 'developing world' in *History and Truth* was used both by Curtis in his formulation of an authentic regionalism and by Kenneth Frampton in his search towards a critical regionalism:

Whence the paradox: on the one hand, it has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revindication before the colonialist's personality. But in order to take part in modern civilisation, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past. It is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilisation. There is a paradox: how to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilisation and take part in universal civilisation.²⁴

Curtis's formulation of regionalism around 1985 is presented in the same terms as the account of the development of modern architecture in Third World countries, which he was preparing the subsequent edition of *Modern Architecture*. Curtis places the notions of modernity, tradition, identity and authenticity at the core of his research. At that time, identity was being re-interpreted as a result of a new general human order in relation to the territory, new understanding of politics, of beliefs; in summary, as a result of a new cultural paradigm. Post-colonialism, secularization and the new self-confidence of non-Western countries had an effect on the architecture –as on any other artistic and cultural product– of not only those countries. In Curtis's opinion, regionalism is not a marginal phenomenon affecting only Third World countries but a universal one and, thus, needs to be subject to an analysis based "on a sound philosophical basis. (...) Nonetheless I [Curtis] feel there is a requirement for cleaning up the house of ideas and for laying the basis for theory."²⁵

Having characterised regionalism as nebulous and hazy, as mentioned above, Curtis tries to shed some light on the notion and defines it in terms of balance or hybrids between struggling realities: urban and rural, industrial and artisan, the "uprootedness of the metropolis"²⁶ and peasant values, modernity and tradition, imported international and indigenous, aboriginal in Australia's case, transient and immutable. An architect that wants to produce an authentic regionalist work of architecture, according to Curtis, acknowledges these dichotomies from an understanding of the new conditions of universal interchange and interdependence that already characterised the world in the 1980s. He claims that there is more than one way to read local tradition, but regionalists attempt to see the type, the general rule,

and the originating principle. An architect that wants to produce an authentic work of architecture, then, would absorb the generating principles and structures of the past, go beyond the surface and incorporate “memories, myths and aspirations that give a society coherence and energy.”²⁷ Having done that, the next step would be to give form to those principles and aspirations in a building that provides an ‘authentic’ expression. Curtis defines this process in terms of cultural excavation and going back to his definition of authenticity, it is through this process that the architect would produce buildings with that certain timeless character, fusing old and new and coming up with pattern languages and common usages or vernaculars of the past.

Curtis introduces an interesting nuance in his discussion adding the possibility of transformation, present also in *Modern Architecture*. By fusing new and old, the new is transformed by the old and the old transformed by the new. And again, the challenge is to maintain the trend and find the right balance between local, national and international. And how do you achieve the balance? As has been mentioned before, Curtis rejects the idea of a checklist to detect authenticity in architecture, but he claims that “‘authentic regionalism’ stands out against all hackneyed and devalued versions of culture, whether these come from the international economic order, from nationalist propaganda, or, more recently, from pan-Islamic clichés.”²⁸

In Curtis’s argument the modern, urban, transient and imported is embodied in the 1980s understanding of the tradition of the International Style. He defends that traditional structures, once understood and internalised by the architect, not manipulated, would be blended with only the best of the modern tradition, not with the worst. His judgment can be understood as both a defence of modern architecture and a critique of the arbitrariness and superficiality of post-modernism. He maintains that through a rigorous understanding of the past and the vernacular is the path towards a non-arbitrary architecture.

What is the result of this fusion of old and new, rural and urban, etc.? For Curtis the result is ‘true’, ‘authentic’, and he explains clearly what authentic regionalism is not: it is not a mere copy of vernacular or pastiches of national cultural stereotypes. In forgetting about the problem of style, the regionalist would achieve an authentic work of architecture that translates immutable principles into thoroughly modern outcomes and that will be added to the stock of cultural memories and would be modern and ancient at the same time. According to Curtis, the regionalist would search for basic values and types well suited to the locale and climate.²⁹ However, it is not only about buildings and local conditions, but also about articulating the philosophy that would address the transformations “from rural and traditional to modern and imported. The former need preserving, or, when new commissions emerge, re-invigorating; the latter need to be ‘regionalised’ but at a level that is much deeper than stylistic or ornamental adornment.”³⁰

A Universal Tradition

To sum up, regardless if referring to Curtis’s general discourse, his account of Australia in the different editions of *Modern Architecture* or his notion of authenticity, the key terms that bring this paper’s ideas to a conclusion are tradition and universalism. Modern architecture is for Curtis a tradition, and with this definition the dichotomy between modernity and tradition disappears. And more importantly, authenticity is the core of his research and not modernity.

It is also important to remember that Curtis characterises this modern tradition as a phenomenon, which embraces transformation. The process of the transforming tradition, after absorbing it, is the way in which Curtis can include post-colonial or Third World countries in his account of modern architecture. What tradition is there to be found in Australia? On the one hand, Curtis admits that it needs to start from scratch and that they have been searching for a new Australian architecture. On the other hand, this was done in a land that combined Aboriginal traditions with imported influences. Even if his account of Australia makes sense within the book’s general discourse and Curtis’s understanding of regionalism, it is the examples he chooses that may not be ‘authentic’ enough, since they are mostly representative of the imported tradition, in the case of Harry Seidler, or of a foreign tradition, in the case of the Sydney Opera House.

Tradition is transformed everywhere in the world, not only in the post-colonial world. Curtis’s argument defends modern tradition as a universal phenomenon that brings together Europe, the United States and the rest of the world. That way he solves a perverse result of the use of the notion of regionalism. Regionalism implied a periphery from a ‘metropolis’ or centre embodied in the Western tradition. And why was not Australia at that time considered a clear

example of regionalism? It could be that Australia's automatic affinity with the Western understanding of modernity resulted in it being less 'regional' than India, Kuwait or Bangladesh. However, these differences are not as important when the dichotomy between international and regional disappears as a result of the notion of universalism. And this is how, between 1982 and 1996, William Curtis went from the search towards an 'authentic' regionalism to framing his account of the development of a universal tradition. However, this conception was hardly new.

As early as 1922, Marcello Piacentini, an Italian architect, rejected the use of international and vernacular as opposed qualifiers for architecture allowing Curtis to claim his rejection towards the opposition of modernity to tradition:

'It involves', he says, 'basically resolving the debate between impersonal, international, standardised architecture and localised vernacular architecture. Are the two tendencies really antithetical? Is it possible to arrive at a vision of sane architecture, which will be neither old nor new, but simply true?' I think that it is worthwhile to reflect on that specially given a certain style of thought, which insists on opposing modernity to tradition. This opposition arises from a false understanding of both ideas. The best within modernism can be profoundly rooted in tradition; and the best in tradition is to do with a dynamic process of rethinking certain central kernel ideas.³¹

In the tradition of the historiography of modern architecture, modernity and its expression in architecture, was presented as aiming at a certain internationalism. Likewise, regionalism has been understood from a historiographic point of view as linked to tradition and vernacular. Curtis empowers the notion of universalism with the ambition of returning to the basic values of architectural principles. And doing so, he dissolves the debate between modernity and tradition and between international and regional. In understanding the development of modern architecture as a 'universal' tradition, Curtis may have found his aimed balance.

The writing of *Modern Architecture* could be considered a 'universal' task. William Curtis visited Australia three times between 1980 and 1981 while writing the book. On his first visit he gave several lectures. During his second visit he taught at the University of New South Wales while working on the manuscript of *Modern Architecture since 1900*. "The last third of the manuscript was nearly lost at the bottom of the River Hawkesbury in Australia when a canoe tilted over."³² In his third visit, Curtis gave the Power Lecture in several cities and taught six weeks at Queensland University of Technology where he met Tom Heath. Moreover, he finished writing the last chapter of *Modern Architecture*, whose last reference is to the Sydney Opera House, in a beach house in Coolumb Beach, north of Brisbane. He recalls it being the result of a single sitting of twenty-four hours.³³ Therefore, it can be stated that the absence of more built examples of authentic Australian architecture is not the result of lack of knowledge or experience, but may be a result of the broader aims of the book. It is also true that some of these examples may be too urban to fit the discourse of landscape and universalism.

Curtis provides a comprehensive narrative of Australian architecture throughout his discourse on the development of modern architecture. Although he visited Australia while working on the manuscript of the first edition, and not while re-working on it, his understanding of Australian modern architecture deepened between 1982 and 1996, between the editions of the book. In addition to this, an important outcome of his research is the development of his own thinking, from the 'authentic' regionalism of the mid-1980s to his definition of universalism. At this point, it may be worth asking: did Curtis construct the most careful account of modern architecture in Australia for a general historiography of modern architecture? It promises to be a fruitful area of future research.

Endnotes

- 1 William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1982).
- 2 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 11.
- 3 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 12.
- 4 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 687.
- 5 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 12.

- 6 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 17.
- 7 William J.R. Curtis, "Authenticity, Abstraction and Ancient Sense: Le Corbusier's and Louis Kahn's ideas of Parliament," *Perspecta* 20 (1983): 183.
- 8 William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 396; (1982, 258).
- 9 D.L. Johnson, *Australian Architecture 1901-51, Sources of Modernism* (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 1980). In the case of Robin Boyd, Curtis mentions his numerous writings on the Australian environment.
- 10 J.M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1968).
- 11 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 503-4.
- 12 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 504. (1982, 336).
- 13 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 504. (1982, 336).
- 14 P. Rudolph, "Regionalism in Architecture," *Perspecta*, 4 (1957): 13.
- 15 J. Taylor, *An Australian Identity, Houses for Sydney 1953-1963* (Sydney: University of Sydney, Department of Architecture, 1972).
- 16 W. Callister, "Dealing with the 'Sydney School': Perspectives on Australian Architecture in the 1950s and 1960s," *Transition*, 21 (September 1987): 6-12.
- 17 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 469 (1982, 304).
- 18 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 469 (1982, 305).
- 19 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 710.
- 20 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 299.
- 21 J. Birrell, *Walter Burley Griffin* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1964).
- 22 Curtis, *Modern Architecture*, 640.
- 23 F. Fromonot, "Contexte, influences," in *Glenn Murcutt, oeuvres et projets* (Paris: Electa-Gallimard, 1995); "Australie," special issue of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, 285 (February 1993);
L. Paroissien and M. Griggs, *Old Continent, New Building, Contemporary Australian Architecture* (Sydney: David Ell Press, 1983); E.M. Farrelly, *Glenn Murcutt - Three Houses* (London: Phaidon, 1993); and
P. Drew, *Leaves of Iron, Pioneer of an Australian Architectural Form* (Sydney: Law Book Co., 1985).
- 24 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 16. Also found in Curtis, "Regionalism in Architecture Session III," in *Regionalism in Architecture*, ed. Robert Powell (Singapore: Concept Media/The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1985), 73.
- 25 Curtis, "Regionalism in Architecture", 73.
- 26 Curtis, "Towards an Authentic Regionalism," in *Mimar 19: Architecture in Development*, ed. Hasan-Uddin Khan (Singapore: Concept Media, 1986): 25.
- 27 Curtis, "Towards an Authentic Regionalism": 24.
- 28 Curtis, "Regionalism in Architecture", 74.
- 29 Curtis, "Regionalism in Architecture", 74.
- 30 Curtis, "Towards an Authentic Regionalism", 25.
- 31 Curtis, "Regionalism in Architecture", 73.
- 32 Curtis, preface to the first edition of *Modern Architecture since 1900* (1982), 6.
- 33 In conversation with William J.R. Curtis, email exchange with Macarena de la Vega de León, 10 March 2016.