

Cultural sustainability – an interview with Kenneth Frampton



Kenneth Frampton

Ingerid Helsing Almaas: Let us start with the idea of place. The importance that for example Christian Norberg-Schulz, particularly in his later works, gives to the idea of *Genius Loci*, has had far-reaching consequences here in Norway. I would go so far as to say that a simplified interpretation of this idea is the foundation for what has actually now become part of our building legislation, namely the idea that the aesthetic quality of the built environment can be safeguarded by referring to local, traditional building forms.³ To put it bluntly, that you can build what you want as long as it has a pitched roof. One thing is the conserving effect that this has on the architecture of a small country, another thing is the political consequences of such an idea: Norberg-Schulz connects place very strongly to the definition of identity, personal as well as national. Norway has been at peace for over 50 years, we are an affluent nation. For the past couple of generations, the idea that where you come from defines who you are has not been very problematic. But you don't have to look very far before this concept actually becomes deadly. Look at Serbs, Croats and Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia for example.

Will this retrospective idea of place be able to adapt to the increasing movement of people, to globalisation? How could one develop an idea of place that made room for the diverging experiences of life that is the reality in most European countries today?

Kenneth Frampton: *When Modern Architecture – A Critical History* was published in 1980, the Czech architectural theorist Dalibor Vesely recommended me an essay by Paul Ricoeur entitled "Universal Civilisation and National Cultures"⁴ which to a certain extent is a discussion about the crisis of identity of decolonialised nations, but which also implies the predicament that even the nations of the so-called first world find themselves in. Ricoeur defines universal civilisation as universal technology, whereas national cultures are characterised by him in plural, as the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind.

One of the reactions introduced by modernisation is to deal with the problem of maintaining psychological security in a time of rapid change. Hence the average suburban house with its pitched roof and so on helps to sustain the fiction that we are still agricultural people. People feel comfortable with this iconography. In order to sustain some kind of psychological security, ordinary people – and bureaucrats on their behalf – feel that it is necessary that such fundamental icons should be sustained, even if it just means a pitched roof instead of a flat one. This may explain, in my view, why Alvar Aalto is the most important architect of the 20th and now even the 21st century. He is still one of the very few architects who have been able to conceive of an architecture capable of providing a certain level of security for ordinary people through his subtle use of form and material.

Einar Bjarki Malmquist: In your essay "On Reading Heidegger"⁵ from 1974, you seem to be introducing another definition of place, based on tectonics and on the actual production, the making of a building. In terms of our discussion about the value of a sense of place, how would you speak about place differently?

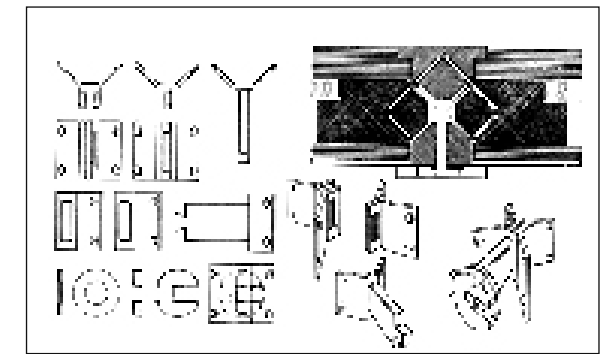
KF: Over the last two or three years I have become increasingly preoccupied with landscape and topography. Polemically, I am categorically against the idea of a building as a freestanding object. The question of place, then, becomes a question of how the built form is integra-



Left: Säynätsalo town hall. Alvar Aalto 1952.

Below: Prefabricated jointing system. Konrad Wachsmann, 1939.

From Gilbert Herbert: *The Packaged House*, 1984.



ted with the ground.

In terms of Gottfried Semper's four elements of architecture: 1. the hearth, 2. the earthwork, 3. the framework/roof, and 4. the enclosing membrane⁶, the earthwork is surely the most fundamental, more so even than the roofwork. It is curious that the building regulations should put such an aesthetic emphasis on the roof when the earthwork is critically the more comprehensive feature.

IHA: How does your interest in earthwork translate to an urban condition?

KF: One always has to put the building into the ground and this raises the issue of how the ground is treated and how you pass from the existing ground conditions to the new base of the building. Surely, one of the tragic things about modernisation is that there is a constant effort to turn built form into a commodity. In this regard, the freestanding object is always moving towards its own commodification. An object that is integrated with the ground has the capacity to resist commodification. I think this applies irrespective of whether a building is within the city or outside it.

Another important thing is the experience of the body. We live in a modern world that is constantly inundated with images. This proliferation of stimuli has a tendency to make people rather insensitive to other more time-honoured culture manifestations. Ultimately, one experiences building on a tactile level, which is perhaps even more important than the visual.

IHA: Going back to that sense of security that was your explanation of our municipal guidelines... Is this common physical experience, the phenomenological level of architecture, a way to replace or develop this image of security that the pitched roof provides? Do you think that if this phenomenological level of experience was made more explicit, more available, that it could be a way for architects to communicate with the general public?

KF: I think one of the predicaments for architects today is the uncomfortable opposition between kitsch, on the one hand, and a kind of self-perpetuating neo-avant-gardism on the other. In my opinion they are both equally negative. Neo-avant-gardism is like an endless striving for originality that affords virtually no references that are accessible to ordinary people. On the other hand, reducing popular aesthetics to the mere presence of a pitched roof tends towards kitsch: One is not just looking for the cheap signs that one can sell to people.

Today, in schools of architecture this issue of social accessibility is never discussed. Ultimately, the problem is how to make housing that is accessible to a generalised middle class identity, without descending into kitsch. And why middle class identity? What else are we programmed to become? Even if our parents were born in Pakistan our children aspire to becoming middle class Norwegians, if this is where they live. And then the problem for architects is: How to be both middle class and modern and yet not fall into kitsch?

But it is one of the peculiar things of the modern world, that human beings are able to sustain a great deal of schizophrenia; in some areas of their life they want reassurance, in others they want surprise. An average western living room contains both fake antiques and the latest electronic gadgets. Humans are split figures, which takes us back to the issue of



Seattle Central Library. OMA 2004.



Far left: Guggenheim, Bilbao. Frank Gehry 1997.



Left: Catalogue house «Aurora» from Nordbohus. One of their best-sellers

security, because I think this split only takes place at a subliminal level for most people and while they are unconscious of this schism they nonetheless search for reassurance as a way of overcoming it.

IHA: You think this schism is actually that uncomfortable to people? Are they not simply happy to live with it? Does the experience of holding a ceramic cup in one hand and a mobile phone in the other actually cause that much pain?

KF: Well, it is an unconscious disjunction, of course, but I think, ultimately, at a subliminal level, people are looking for reassurance. If you think we're sliding into politics rather heavily here...

IHA: Yes, let's get into politics.

KF: Well, the compensatory popularity of the Oscars for example, Hollywood's provision of dream worlds, even nightmares, that enable people to overcome their difficult, boring, alienated lives in order to sustain themselves. Thomas Frank wrote a book after Bush was elected for a second term with the title *What's the Matter with Kansas?*. Kansas is a very impoverished state, yet they voted for the Republican Party. The question is why did these people vote for this party, which is so manifestly the government of the super-rich? This question is not easy to answer. Do they compensate for their poverty by identifying vicariously with power, with the glamorously famous and wealthy?

IHA: It is strange how certain things are excluded from the common level of discourse – there's sex of course, and money – but it is strange that the discussion of issues that have political implications seem to embarrass people.

KF: It is a kind of repression, unconsciously absorbed repression. What else is it? It's as though people feel if the discussion goes in the direction of politics it will inevitably lead to painful truths and even to more painful conflicts...

But we cannot reduce the discourse of architecture solely to politics. I think a really complex work of architecture ought to have more than one level to it, that it ought to be able to deal with this question of class and national identity, without reducing everything to that. But the aesthetic regulations of the building code tend, by definition, to be reductive.

IHA: But conceiving and realising this multi-levelled work or architecture – is that a question of personal talent? Or is there something you can do in schools of architecture that can give architecture in general a richer background of reference?

KF: I think there are things you can do in schools of architecture, but you have to really work at it. I think there is a lot of architectural theory today that has a somewhat obscurantist effect... And then there are other kinds of theories that are ultra-technological, tending towards universal civilisation, to quote Ricoeur again. Typical of that is the current trend for digitalised draughting and, more crucially, the digitalised generation of form. This is once again, a

subliminal effort on the part of architecture to legitimise itself through technology, similar to the modular rationalised prefabricated production in the 1960's for example.

IHA: Going on from Ricoeurs essay "Universal Civilisation and National Cultures", you have often brought up the issue of resistance to a Universal Civilisation, and you quote Ricoeur saying that one of the resources a national culture needs is independent funds. A nation that is financially dependent on another nation will never be able to assert its own cultural identity. Norway is a very rich country, but I think it is up for discussion whether we are culturally assertive – the influence of Anglo-American culture, for example, is very obvious throughout the last half of the 20th century. The building industry, for example, is very standardised and dominated by internationally available products. And on the other hand, if you look at how Norway is marketed as a tourist product, for example, it is clear public culture has tended towards a very traditionalist image – kitsch, in your terms. Clearly, money is not enough. So what else do you need in order to resist universal pressures? There is always a temptation amongst architects to think that if you just have enough money, you can get quality in architecture. That if you can pay for polished plaster and solid brass and Japanese quality concrete, you will achieve tectonic quality. But what else does it take?

KF: A key word here is maximisation. I have increasingly felt that architecture has to confront more conscientiously the question of sustainability, of ecology, of the embodied energy of building materials on one side, and to set this against the maximisation of technology. The very term maximisation is the problem; from the maximisation of profit to the maximisation of suburbanisation.

IHA: So having enough is not enough?

KF: Our relationship to nature is surely the fundamental issue. The attitude of the talking animal has always been the maximal exploitation of natural resources. But it is clear that nature is going to have the last word in this game in the end. It already is reacting to our profligacy.

IHA: It's interesting that you say that nature will win: Many environmentalists would say the opposite, that nature is losing, being destroyed.

KF: Of course. Nature is losing, but we are going to go with it. And in that sense the earth will have the last word.

EBM: Many architects and engineers seem to hope that the future of sustainability rests in hi-tech technology, that more advanced, better systems will allow us to retain our level of consumption.

IHA: But you are arguing for a kind of cultural self-restraint?

KF: Yes, and for a more complex attitude towards nature, or towards the interface between

1. Frampton, K. (1983): "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*, red. Hal Foster, Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, p. 17
2. Lefaivre, L. og Tzonis, A. (2003): *Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World*, Prestel Verlag
3. The Planning and Building Act (1985), kap. XIII §74 states: "The municipality shall ensure that any work that is subject to the provisions of this Act is planned and carried out in such a way that, in the municipality's opinion, it satisfies reasonable aesthetic requirements both in itself and in relation to the surroundings. Measures taken pursuant to this Act shall be aesthetically well designed in accordance with the functions thereof and with respect for natural and built-up surroundings. Unsightly colours are not permitted and may be required to be changed."
4. Ricoeur, P. (1992): *History and Truth*. Northwestern University Press
5. Frampton, K. : "On Reading Heidegger" in *Oppositions* no. 4, 1974
6. Frampton, K. (1995) *Studies in Tectonic Culture. The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

nature and culture. Technology is not enough. You cannot legislate one maximised solution, say certain insulation criteria, thicknesses of windows, maximum glazing areas etc without taking into consideration the overall cultural result.

Sometimes I say to students that building culture is anachronistic, and that's its big strength. When you dig a hole in the ground or when you put a building into a site, there are no refined technologies at play. The ground is a mess; you have to use wet material, concrete... It's as primitive as putting a building into the ground during the Roman period. And I think that the coexistence of different technologies in architecture gives us the message that certain techniques, very old techniques, are still available to us; that you don't necessarily only have to use the latest inventions. We are all victims of an ideology of technology, as opposed to being able to choose, on cultural grounds, why one should use this solution and not that. Without excluding the advantages of refined technology, I think that one has to have a more discursive attitude towards the choices one makes in building.

IHA: In several of your recent essays, you place a great deal of responsibility for architecture on the client. In Norway at least, architects often feel very alone in trying to fight for quality against the windmills of building finance for example. At the same time, current practice and contractual conditions have meant that the design and production of a building is actually a collaborative effort. Would a higher level of general public discourse on architecture and planning be an advantage?

KF: The paradox is that architecture gets more media exposure now than it used to get. The spectacular side of architecture gets a lot of attention. But I don't have an answer to your question about public discourse. Perhaps it's a question of the general level of education about the environment as a whole, and about the built environment in particular. This ought to be part of national educational policy.

IHA: If you extended that imaginary architectural curriculum to take in the environment as a whole, rather than just the built environment, that could potentially ignite a completely different public interest in architecture. "Environment", rather than "built environment", is a term that is already deeply rooted in public discourse. That angle could give architecture, and architects, a new and different public role, if they were willing and able to take it.

EBM: So the angle of the question is: Is there any mission left for architects in the modern world? Is your idea of resistance the architects' mission?

KF: This also has a political dimension. Even if it might be somewhat quixotic, I'm someone who thinks that even though it was a totalitarian state, the collapse of the Soviet Union was some kind of a disaster. Not for the Russians, but for us, because it meant the triumph of global capitalism, that is to say of one sole system.

IHA: Well, it means there are no alternatives left.

KF: The fact there is no "other" way forward is surely very negative for the current historical



Railings, Videseter falls, Strynefjellet mountain road.
Jensen & Skodvin 1997.

situation. And perhaps only by stressing the complexity of things, the complexity of the relationship between nature and culture, can we move on from here. The question of the environment, is already becoming quixotic, in that there seems to be overwhelming evidence that if things don't change in the next ten years, or even five years, the so-called tipping point will be reached; in which case, if one believes the scientists, the ice caps are going to melt, and the consequences are beyond belief.

In this regard, with reference to our earlier points about ordinary people and the need for unconscious repression of inconvenient truths, I think people really don't want to know. The topic surfaces from time to time in the newspapers and so on, but no one knows what to do about it. Only at the point at which some people are forced to do something, even if it's a bit late, the political climate will change. Because the idea that one can go on consuming at today's rate is patently a fallacy. And perhaps some kind of collective awareness will eventually manifest itself. This is where architecture, if it had already developed the tools to deal with the problem at the necessary level of complexity, could really present itself once again as an avant-garde.

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Railings, Videseter falls. Plan.