

Foreword to Antigoni Kantasakou's *Rethinking Modernity...*
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FOREWORD TO

ANTIGONI KANTASAKOU: *RETHINKING MODERNITY. BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE INTERNATIONAL.*

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**FOREWORD TO ANTIGONI KANTASAKOU'S RETHINKING MODERNITY. BETWEEN
THE LOCAL AND THE INTERNATIONAL.
RIBA PUBLISHING, 2020, LONDON.**

There is a challenge that many gifted critics face at a crucial moment of their career: out of the existing introductions to modern architecture, those that we remember have a special taint that makes them distinctive. And, as different architectural approaches appear with time, new viewpoints are needed. In *Rethinking Modernity: Between the Local and the International*, a straightforward approach is evident as soon as one opens the book or looks at the title. Discussing projects both familiar and little-known in order to demonstrate the concepts in question, this book is a vivid commentary and celebration of architecture that keeps the reader's interest undiminished. This is not a revision of, or a search for yet another definition of modernity, but a rethinking of it, with all the implications such an approach entails.

Criticists of modern architecture are aware of both the bias produced in its development and the plurality of its roots (1).

Paul Ricoeur had already pondered a paradox as early as 1961: *"how to become modern and to return to sources, how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization"*(2)

This was a point that fostered Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism: *"regional or national cultures must today, more than ever, be ultimately constituted as locally inflected manifestations of "world culture"?*

Frampton provided in six pragmatic points an accurate representation of the situation at the time and stressed oppositions between different attitudes (Regionalism of Restriction as opposed to Regionalism of Liberation). Critiques of functionalism and facilitation of communications served the study of traditions and the renewal of cultural knowledge while promoting individual identities and establishing a social solidarity of a new kind.

When, in 1978, Alan Colquhoun distinguished between form and figure, a new understanding of the modern could already be sensed amongst scholars that sought a sounder interpretation of architectural practice. Colquhoun understood that the dualism form/function could no longer provide the required insight to explain the break from older cultures and traditions. He proposed the dialectic of form and figure instead, with form perceived as a configuration related to no particular meaning, whereas figure is perceived as inseparable from the specific culture within which designers work and is shaped by recognizable elements. Associative meanings helped renew architectural practice, not by what existed before *"but by emergent social and technological facts, operating on a minimum number of constant physiological and psychological laws"*(4)

Critiques of functionalism and facilitation of communications served the study of traditions and the renewal of cultural knowledge, while promoting individual identities and establishing a social solidarity of a new kind. Thirty years later, these dynamic views have spread

across the planet, with all the resulting difficulties and contingencies. The author is clear in the conclusion about the extent of such a state of affairs: today, we must encompass all cases with enough paradigmatic strength to propose entirely new readings.

Sufficient time has elapsed to suggest new interpretations of the original concepts. New classifications of architectural modernity are being considered because the corpus of works produced after criticists and historians coined the term "*postmodern*" (with similar bluntness to the transformers of modernity into an International Style) is more than impressive. Modern and postmodern can now be understood as differentiated positions in the century-long struggle between art and technology rather than as chronological eras. At the same time, a higher degree of precision has been proposed in respect to terms used to describe relative phenomena, offering a fascinating challenge to re-discover past and present architecture and propose future classifications.(5)

Nevertheless, there was one clear aspect in the debate induced by the postmodern: if we continue labouring defective assumptions, we are bound to reproduce them, with added risks. Mis-readings of original concepts appear now at a global scale and silence can be cruel in our mass-media age, where a lack of headlines on a project can be mistaken as irrelevance.

The appeal of ***Rethinking Modernity*** lies in its much-needed critical courage. One is relieved to see included great works by modest designers, while low-key interventions are also recovered from neglect, finding new life. Accordingly, architectural modernity is treated as a phenomenon that went beyond the avant-garde, to consider outstanding "*silent*" Nordic, Mediterranean or Iberian-American architects, and even Far-Eastern examples, quite often forgotten.

As is evident from the chapter headings, rethinking is developed, stressing new sets of architectural values that must be applied to modernity as we understand it today. Since original undertakings have to do with a concern for origins or *arché* [ἀρχή] (beginning of things), Antigoni Katsakou reminds us that tradition and identity are inseparable, and that architectural quality can be

approached today as inextricably twined with subjective, haptic spatial experiences rejoiced by users. She thus provides analytical strategies that are considerate to both forerunners and recent descendants, and which are necessary to understand continuity on the one hand and the ever-changing nature of architectural creativity on the other.

These reflections come to light at the precise moment when the centenary of several avant-garde masters is celebrated. They did not ignore spontaneous architecture or archaic cultures; rather, they learnt from them, preceding the pragmatic links between so-called Critical Regionalism and local cultures.

There is neither understanding nor representation without interpretation, and interpretation often relies on normative qualities that prove their usefulness in critical! reflection. The criticist then becomes in turn subject to the norm as any other member of the community, a fact very seldom interiorized. In this sense, the author displays an unassuming turn of mind, taking care not to hasten to conclusions.

This is a book to reflect upon, but also a book to enjoy truly great architecture, without pretensions, through the presentation of facts and their sheer beauty, autonomy and actuality. Rethinking Modernity is a breath of fresh air for designers willing to broaden their scope and a testimony of good intentions towards young architects-to-be.

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Endnotes

- 1 C. St John Wilson, *The Other tradition of modern architecture: the uncompleted project*, London, Academy Editions, 1995.
- 2 P. Ricoeur, 'Universal Civilization and National Cultures: 1961. Originally published in *History and Truth*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1965, pp 271-84, trans. Charles A. Kelbley. Reprinted courtesy of Northwestern University Press,
- 3 K. Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1985, p 314.
- 4 A. Colquhoun, 'Form and Figure: Oppositions 12 (Spring 1978)', 1978, p 33.
- 5 D. Mertins, *Modernity Unbound: Other Histories of Architectural Modernity*, London, Architectural Association Publications, 2011, p 187.

Post-scriptum

Seeing the excellent work by Dr. Antigoni Katsakou, as it was growing, has been an unforgettable experience. New feelings crop up as the book develops. One must congratulate the author and the Editing team that treated this task with utmost delicacy. Quite simply: enjoy it.

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