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Here, there and North of nowhere.

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Here, There and North of Nowhere

JEREMY TILL

Global/local is a classic binary, with all the problems associated with binary thinking. One half of the pair is seen to be dominant – for example the Cartesian mind – leaving the other half – the body – suppressed. In the global/local pairing it is the global that is accepted as in the ascendant leaving the local overwhelmed and continually under threat. And so sides are taken, the underdog is championed and much effort put into defining its special status. However, this focus on the suppressed leaves the other half unscathed because all the critical attention is not on the structures and potential fault lines of the dominant, but on the restitution of the values of the 'other'. There is a sense of retreat away from the suppressor to a place of sanctuary, around which walls are erected against the raging forces beyond. And with this retreat there is a concomitant feeling of hopelessness, an inevitability of failure because not only has the dominant half been left untouched, but worse, the minor pair is still framed within the major's ideological structure.

This is the inexorable logic of the binary and its dialectical structure, one force set in opposition to another. Start with the strong (global) and posit, and then champion, its weaker half (the local). The homogenisation of the urban realm is bad: therefore introduce heterogeneity. The saturation of the instant is prevalent: ergo go slow. The visual realm is privileged: restore the tactile. Abstract space: grounded place. Universal technique: vernacular craft. Opposites proliferate, but they are always in reaction to the dominant, and thus either in the thrall of it or in retreat from it. Resistance is claimed, but it is really no more effective than a boxer exhausting himself against the swinging mass of the punch bag.

All of which is by way of introducing the hopelessness of the most famous of all architectural commentaries on the global/local, namely Kenneth Frampton's *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an architecture of resistance*.¹ Frampton is enough a reader of the Frankfurt School to enact a dialectical movement between 'universal civilisation' on the one, bad, hand and 'critical regionalism' on the other, redemptive, hand. But he is not enough of a follower of the Frankfurt School to situate the dialectic in the political and social life-world. Thus the resistance of the title of the essay is provided by architecture as object, as opposed by architecture as the setting and catalyst for social life. It is a resistance that 'may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a *tectonic* derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site.' These qualities of architecture are all associated with the phenomenal reception of space and whilst a phenomenological reading of architecture is not necessarily incompatible with a social one (as Lefebvre shows so cogently), Frampton's argument remains firmly within the aesthetics and, especially, tectonics of architecture qua object. The key term, in Frampton's italics, is 'tectonic', and it is worth quoting at some length how he defines this term, and how he begins to see it an agent of resistance:

The primary principle of the autonomy of architecture resides in the tectonic rather than the scenographic: that is to say this autonomy is embodied in the revealed ligaments of the construction and in the way in which the syntactical form of the structure explicitly reveals the action of gravity. ... The tactile and the tectonic jointly have the capacity to transcend the mere appearance of the technical in much the same way as the place-form has the potential to withstand the relentless onslaught of global modernism.



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In later text he makes the resistive potential of tectonics in relation to global capital still clearer:

For all its marginality, tectonic culture still possesses a vestigially resistant core, particularly as this is manifest in its proclivity for the tactile. This dimension resists the maximising thrust of capitalism, determined now, as never before, on the process of global commodification.ⁱⁱ

Now is it just me, or isn't the idea that the effects of global capital and universal civilisation are going to be resisted through a tectonic revealing the honesty of its construction really rather bathetic – in the sense of the word as the anticlimax that one senses when what one has seen as trivial turns out in fact to be trivial. Well, it must be me, because Frampton's call to ordered arms, his *Rappel A L'Ordre*ⁱⁱⁱ, is held in such veneration in architectural circles.^{iv} He provides a comfort zone for architects in which to exert their expertise. Whilst other matters (users, time, taste) are beyond our control, we still – just – hold sway over the way that buildings may artfully be put together, over material matters. And if Frampton tells us that this activity in all its rectitude serves a local purpose against the onslaught of global modernism, and if (still more insidiously) Mies tells us that it assumes some kind of higher moral purpose ('God lies in the details'), then so much the better.^v

This is not to dismiss out of hand the making of buildings as a respectable occupation; I enjoy admiring the 'good' detail as much as the next architect, which is probably excessively more than the average punter for whom the shadow gap is somewhere dirt collects rather than a place of near spiritual necessity. But it is to argue that our aesthetic and technical twiddlings – whilst the world burns - are accorded a reverence, and association with resistance, that they simply do not deserve. Holding to the hope of redemption through tectonics is only tenable under a belief system that posits the "autonomy of architecture". As soon as one situates, as one must, architecture - as both practice and product - within the social life-world, then that hope crumbles in the face of dirty reality.

It is therefore necessary to employ other tactics beyond the restitution of an aesthetic or tectonic identity in order to address the dynamics of the global and local. First off is to dissolve the rigid binary of global/local or rather, according to Zygmunt Bauman's compelling analysis of contemporary life, to see us in state of "liquid modernity", in which traditional categories merge and the global/local are characterised in a much more complex, uncertain and turbulent relationship than the simplistic dialectic ever allows.^{vi} It is a liquidity that washes away the identification of the global as necessarily bad (though Bauman is trenchant in his critique of the worst effects of globalisation)^{vii}, and the local as unremittingly good. It is a liquidity which demands that we are aware of the tensions that exist across all scales and does not allow us to retreat behind the false hope of barriers erected against the tide of global domination. The point is beautifully made by Bruno Latour who argues that, faced with the confusion of the contemporary labyrinth:

...there is an Ariadne's thread that would allow us to pass with continuity from the local to the global, from the human to the nonhuman. It is the thread of networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations...the two extremes, local and global, are much less interesting than the intermediary arrangements that we are calling networks.

The important term here is networks, which suggests a set of negotiations between the extremes. This is different from the now commonplace term the 'glocal', which implies an uncritical and inevitable hybridisation of the two. The rallying call of the glocal ('think global, act local') is in the end despairing in its ordering of its terms, in which the intellectual and social conditions of the global overwhelm the simple action of the local. Latour's networks imply that there is such a thing as local knowledge, but that this needs to be played out in a context in which strict modernist categories and divisions are dissolved.

In a modest way this was what we were trying to achieve in our exhibition for the British Pavilion at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale.^x The aim of Echo/City was to present a city, Sheffield, that is great almost despite its architecture. It is a city that invokes an extraordinary sense of loyalty from its citizens (and in this has a bedrock of local identity) and at the same time has been buffeted by global forces (most tellingly in the way that its steelworks have passed from British to Dutch to Finnish to Indian ownership in the space of fifteen years.) Our simple idea was to document Sheffield across a range of scales 1:1, 1:100, 1:10,000, 1:10,000,000, an 'urban register' that exposed the city beyond the architectural comfort zone (which I would put at 1:100, a scale just big enough to pretend that what one is drawing is real but just small enough not to have to confront reality).

Our key move was to understand these scales as both topographical *and* social; they are thus suggestive of one's relationship with numbers of others, from the intimacy of the one-on-one to the anonymity of being lost in global networks. In their concentration on the 1:100 (the composition and making of buildings) architects tend to eschew the dynamics of the other scales and the rich interplay across them. Their main loss is an understanding of buildings and the places between them as the settings for the social and political life. We therefore introduced human experience as the common thread of our urban register, taking the role of people in the understanding and making of cities as a central concern, and confronting architecture's tendency to abstract the human, the social and the political.

To this end each scale had a subtitle that reinforced the interplay between social and physical:

1:1 More than just a detail
 1:100 One architect to one hundred citizens
 1:10,000 These are stories not streets
 1:10,000,000 Here, There, and North of Nowhere

One encountered the scales in no particular order. For the purposes of this issue of *building material*, perhaps the most poignant moment was the threshold between the 1:1 and the 1:10,000,000 rooms. In the former visitors to the exhibition were covering the walls with their take on the most local scale of the city, whilst through the door was a soundscape and animation of Sheffield's relationship to the global, depicting the city's outward diaspora and inward magnet.^{xi} Standing in the threshold one felt both the connection and the difference between these two scales.

The phrase *Here, There, and North of Nowhere* is the way that Ian Anderson of The Designers Republic describes Sheffield. It is here, grounded in its own sense and identity, it is out there traversing the global

networks and it is definitely north of nowhere [a reference dismissing the patronising associations of the North of England with something rather secondary]. It is a phrase that indicates that global/local is not an either/or but a both /and, and that if cities like Sheffield can survive that apparent paradox, then so can others. It is a challenge to architects to open up their radar to a wider set of issues than merely the aesthetic and tectonic, and instead follow the Ariadne's thread through the urban register with all its social, political and physical connotations. Only then can we possibly invoke the word 'critical' that Frampton introduces but never fulfils.

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- i Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: six points for an architecture of resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983). Frampton acknowledges his debt to Tzonis and Lefaivre for the invention of the term 'critical regionalism' in their article 'The grid and pathway', *Architecture in Greece*, 15, Athens, 1981, p. 178
- ii Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: the poetics of construction in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), p. 377.
- iii Kenneth Frampton, 'Rappel a l'ordre, The Case for the Tectonic', Kate Nesbitt, editor, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture, An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995*, (Princeton, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 522.
- iv Well me and Sola Morales, who notes in relation to Frampton: "I believe it is naïve to accept at the same time the viability of certain tectonic categories that can only be intelligible within the order of the old political urban culture of the classical age...a phenomenologically ingenious restoration that reveals little or no sense of the contemporary crisis." Ignasi de Solà-Morales, *Differences: topographies of contemporary architecture*, trans. Graham Thompson (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), p. 63.. Or maybe me, Sola Morales and Banham, the latter who dismisses the notion of resistance as "self-righteous cant of New York academe represented by Kenneth Frampton." Reyner Banham, "A Black Box: the secret profession of architecture," in *A Critic Writes*, ed. Mary Banham (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 298.
- v This argument is developed in Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth, "The Future is Hairy," in *Architecture : the subject is matter*, ed. Jonathan Hill (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).
- vi Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997)..
- vii Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: the human consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).
- viii Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 121.
- ix The term 'local knowledge' comes from Clifford Geertz, who writes: "Like gardening, politics, and poetry, law and ethnography are crafts of place: they work by the light of local knowledge. Whatever else anthropology and jurisprudence may have in common, they are alike absorbed with the artisan task of seeing broad principles in parochial facts. 'Wisdom', as an African proverb has it, 'comes out of an ant heap.'" There is no reason not to add architecture to his list of disciplines. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 169.
- x The team which I coordinated for the pavilion was, in alphabetical order: Ian Anderson, Ruth Ben-Tovim, Tim Etchells, Hugo Glendinning, Trish O'Shea, Jim Prevett, Jeremy Till, Martyn Ware and Sarah Wigglesworth. The catalogue is available through Cornerhouse: Jeremy Till, *Echo/City: An Urban Register* (London: The British Council, 2006).
- xi A fuzzy version of this animation/soundscape can be found on YouTube. Search for 'magnet diaspora ware'. The designers were Martyn Ware (soundscape) and Malcolm Garrett (animation).