

Ethical Relativism and Critical Regionalism: An Ethical Viewpoint on the Non-Western Architectural Professions

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ABSTRACT

 This paper focuses on the ethical theories and practices relating to Critical Regionalism, Tropicality, and Contemporary Vernacular today. Ethical Relativism is selected as a main ethical philosophy to question, challenge, and examine the hybridized fusion that results when the complex structural dislocation of Western modern discourse is applied to different regional grounds far from its origin. Ethical Relativism denies that there is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all people at all times. The empirically ascertained fact of this ethics is that there are a great many different and even conflicting rules and practices prevailing at different times and in different place. Therefore the same act may be regarded as right in one place and as wrong in another.

Keywords: *Ethical Relativism, Cultural Relativism, Critical Regionalism, ethics, architectural professions*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of universalization, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also of what I shall call for the time being the creative nucleus of great cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life, what I shall call in advance the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind. The conflict springs up from there.—Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (as cited in Frampton, 1983, p. 16)

At the turn of the twentieth century, Modernism declared itself as a timeless resolution to universal questions. Nearly a century later, a crucial opposing theory, *Critical Regionalism*, also emerged from the same base—in response to diversity. This architectural dilemma between Universality and Locality generates a question: “if modern architecture is a well-crafted response to the universal questions, why is it representation condemned and ridiculed by critics, who particularly concerning its interaction within regional context? Moreover, why does *Placeless* architecture become one of the most crucial dilemmas of the twentieth-first century,



Figure 1:
OMA and Buro Ole Scheeren's international design of MahaNakhon provokes the Critical Regionalism movement.
(Source: <http://www.mahanakhon.com/whaton.php>)

despite its root in *Neue Sachlichkeit*?¹ Paul Ricoeur's quoted in *Towards a Critical Regionalism*, "[I]t is a fact: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources: how to revive an old, dormant civilization

and take part in universal civilization" (Frampton, 1983, p.16). Many architects, in particular those who work internationally, inevitably encounter this inescapable *Phenomenon of Universalization*, which generally ignores the indigenous foundations of the place and its *in situ* memory (Figure 1).

¹ *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity was a movement in German art that arose during the 1920s as a reaction against expressionism. The art historian Dennis Crockett states there is no direct English translation for the word, and breaks down the meaning in the original German as:

Sachlichkeit should be understood by its root, *Sache*, meaning "thing," "fact," "subject," or "object." *Sachlich* could be best understood as "factual," "matter-of-fact," "impartial," "practical," or "precise;" *Sachlichkeit* is the noun form of the adjective/adverb and usually implies "matter-of-factness." See "New Objectivity," *Wikipedia*, last modified February 5, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Objectivity.

The Eurocentric basis architectural and planning education, which was founded during Imperialism era, might be one of the factors that causes the lack of local self-awareness. Therefore, while Asian scholars participate in a search for connections between Western rationality and its reception indoctrinating Asian nations, others should focus on the theories and ethics relating to Critical Regionalism, Tropicality, and Contemporary Vernacular. Hence, it is interesting to question, challenge, and examine the hybridized fusion of a non-Westerner's perspective regarding the selection of Western heritage elements. These elements have become the architectural styles of each tropical Asian nation.

In this paper, *Ethical Relativism*, the theory that moral ideas are necessarily "relative to" a particular society, is selected as the main ethical theory to examine the complex structural dislocation of Western modern discourse. This is examined regionally rather than from Western origins. This ethic not only presents an alternative postmodern imagery of the modern Western model, but also reveals a position which denies that there is a single moral standard universally applied. An example of this is that there are a great many different and even conflicting rules and practices prevailing through time and place. The same act may be regarded as right in one place and as wrong in another. Ethical Relativism, clearly reflects the standpoint of a particular society and only holds true for that society. In the case of a conflict between different standards, understanding Ethical Relativism will help resolve Critical Regionalism issues. This paper will discuss the argument concerning subjectivism and the multiple views of moral disagreements between the Western architectural pedagogies and local Asian architecture. This will be done through Ethical Relativism.

THE FAILURE OF INTERNATIONAL STYLE AND THE RISE OF CRITICAL REGIONALISM

Following the second industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, the wave of Western Imperialism almost entirely occupied the *Other* parts of the world through many strategical movements; from political subjugation, economical exploitation, to cultural transplantation. This is particularly true of territories in Asia and Africa. Correspondently, this undertaking allowed the West to gain confidence in globally initiating Eurocentric values. Colonialization forcibly imposed modernity, universality, urban forms, social,

economic and political structures. Collectively, this Western technology-based civilization established a major impact on local cultures. Furthermore, confronting dissimilar civilizations of different religions and value systems often resulted in disastrous and tragic consequences. It is therefore understandable that many in the West, rather than the East, have a strong sense of possession over modernity. Within Asian and African perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that the democratic applications of Modernity in the West were only practiced within the boundaries of its nation-states, and did not apply in any effective manner to the non-Western other (Lim, 2003, p. 96).

Tracing the origin of Western Imperialism and Colonialism are generally understood to have begun in the 1450s and ended in approximately the 1970s. During its prosperous era, countries, such as Spain, Britain, France, and Portugal, exercised their power over *Others* whether through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect mechanisms of control. These stronger nations' highest aims was the establishment of colonies in Asia, Africa, and other "weaker" regions, and the full exploitation of the natural and human resources of the subjugated countries. The colonizers also influenced their colonies via social and cultural aspects. For instance, the colonial nations introduced their religions, beliefs, clothing preferences, culinary choices, and other ideologies to the subjugated nations. In order to have a better position in the society, indigenous people in the colonial countries embraced these Western concepts. At the end of the 1970s, most of the colonies were independent nations. Notwithstanding, the colonial power did not completely disappear, it was replaced by a new era of Neocolonialism which later led to a new age of Neoliberal Globalization, the twentieth-century resurgence of the nineteenth-century trading concept.

At the turn of the twentieth century, still in the colonial era, that Modernism became more arrogant and marked itself as a timeless resolution to all universal questions, particularly in architectural and city-planning dimensions. Kenneth Frampton emphasizes this issue (1983, p. 16):

[T]he last two decades, however, have radically transformed the metropolitan centers of the developed world. What were still essentially 19th-century city fabrics in the early 1960s have since become progressively overlaid by the two symbiotic instruments of Megalopolitan development—the freestanding high-rise and the serpentine freeway ... The typical downtown which, up to twenty years ago, still presented

a mixture of residential stock with tertiary and secondary industry has now become a little more than a *burolandschaft* city-scape: the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture.

the people and be morally inspiring (Stott, 2014). Hence, prior to justifying modern architecture and its receptions as a failure, one should understand the initial establishment of the International Style.

The U.S.-invented modernity has been seriously challenged due to its generalization, imposed on different regions and cultures. Subsequently, the products of modern architecture and urbanism such as International Style and Urban Renewal that were later imposed on Asian and African countries were condemned for their insensitive scale and ruthless destruction of communities, while the New Brutalist style was vilified for its wasteful formalism (Ingersoll, 1999, XVI-LV). To be more specific, a competition-winning design for a Tokyo 2020 Olympics stadium proposed by an international renowned architect, Zaha Hadid, was slammed by the local Japanese audiences and architects as a “monumental mistake” and a “disgrace to future generations” because it did not reflect the life and culture of Japanese society (Wainwright, 2014) (Figure 1). The trend of selecting international designers for local projects such as OMA’s CCTV Headquarters was also deplored by the President of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping, as a practice of building that should no longer be fused in the Beijing area (Figure2). The President further expressed that the art should serve

International Style is a term which emerged from the title of an exhibit Modern Architecture: International Exhibition installed at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Curated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, the style is generally perceived to represent those characteristics common to Modern Architecture across the world which transcends national, regional, and continental identity. Its characteristics are highlighted in terms of a new architectural intervention which opposed European and American traditional arts-and-crafts styles. Johnson wrote, “... probably the first fundamentally original and widely distributed style since the Gothic” (Merin, 2013). However, Elizabeth Mock, one of the influential advocacies of Modern Architecture and a curator of the exhibition, Built in the USA: 1932-1944, notes that, “... what had been disregarded was the fact that the entire exhibition was an example of “badly assimilated European modernism”.” Her initial definition of modernity, or more precisely American modernity, was much larger in scope than that of Johnson and Hitchcock, and of a pre-war Le Corbusier, Gropius,



Figure 2:
Zaha Hadid Architects' design of Tokyo 2020 Olympics stadium located in Tokyo, Japan.
(Source: <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/zaha-hadid-to-design-new-national-stadium-japan/>)



Figure 3:
OMA's CCTV Headquarter can be seen standing dominantly among the local Beijing buildings.
(Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/13/arts/design/koolhaass-cctv-building-fits-beijing-as-city-of-the-future.html>)

and Sert inspired CIAM that had served as their model (Lefaivre, 2003, p. 24). Thus, in addition to succeeding in functionality, modern architecture also encompassed the issue of community. Mock absolutely saw Regionalism as a necessary facet of modernism rather than its antithesis (Lefaivre, 2003, p. 24). This has led to a recent study of scholarship in Asia. Asian intellectuals are now arguing for the necessity of reexamining Western-based modernist perceptions in order to reinterpret the historic Asian legitimacy in terms of their own modernity.

Therefore, an Asian cultural reaction is taking place and is known as Critical Regionalism. The Critical Regional argument is grounded in a rooted strategy, *arriere-gardism*. The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place (Frampton, 1983, p. 21). According to Alex Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre, and Kenneth Frampton's suggestions, the way to advance Critical Regionalism effectively is to maintain a high level of critical self-consciousness. For instance, this can be accomplished by; acquiring an inspiration under the local light, finding a *tectonic* derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the

topography of a given site (Frampton, 1983, p. 21). The visual images of civic projects and public spaces in Asian and African countries have been greatly distorted by the Western modernist aesthetic dominance and negating local history. Fortunately, in the last two decades, the younger generation of architects in these countries have started to recognize the importance of local characteristics to rethink and relink their own past to the process of their architectural creations. However, to integrate the living experiences with current building practices, an ethical theory should be extensively mentioned in terms of ethical architectural practices.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Saul Fisher referred to Critical Regionalism, (2012, p.172) in "How to think about the ethics of architecture" as a movement that promotes cultural bounds in order to resolve the architecture's ethical dilemmas". However, Fisher remarked that "[I]t fails to identify any deep ethical difficulties and much less resolve them. Furthermore, Critical Regionalism

introduces an insupportable Cultural Relativism, which proscribes meaningful, intersubjective ethical analysis.” Apparently, Cultural Relativism alone might not be able to provide any definite resolution to solve the problematic issues regarding Critical Regionalism since it maintains that there is an irreducible diversity among cultures. Moreover, Cultural Relativism claims that because each culture is a unique whole with parts intertwined, none of the parts can be understood or evaluated without reference to the other parts and to the cultural as a whole, the so-called pattern of culture (Ladd, 1973, p. 2). Hence, its failure may be that an initial study of this ethic emerges from an anthropological point of view which specifically examines only one particular culture. Therefore, the analysis might dismiss that there are many multi-cultural humanoids among various human dynamism. Humans could experience and gain an expertise of more than one culture simultaneously. In order to re-exam the ethical theory of architectural Critical Regionalism effectively, the combination of the two ethical theories—Cultural Relativism and Ethical Relativism—together could help further expand the its applications. Thus, the highest aim of this argument is to confirm the fact that diversity and discordance co-exist with moral precepts and moral codes, especially in different societies, and is inescapable.

To clearly explain the theory of Ethical Relativism, John Ladd (1973, p. 1) illustrates his definition of it as: the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society to society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. Accordingly, it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he belongs. What is right in one society may well be wrong in another society and may be neither right nor wrong in a third society.

The rationality of Cultural Relativism and Ethical Relativism is established on two logically associated components: the first is *dependency thesis* and the second is the *diversity thesis*. The *dependency thesis* asserts that the moral beliefs, rules, and practices of a society are necessarily and invariably dependent for their validity on other facets of the culture, for

example, its institutions, its economy, its language, or its cultural pattern (Ladd, 1973, p. 3). Moral opinions regarding *dependency thesis* are relative to cultural determinants of some particular sense in that they are causally dependent upon them. For example, the Southeast Asian traditional houses are raised on stilts and topped with a steep gabled roof to handle the continental Monsoon season (Figure 4). According to this thesis, it is not possible to truly understand certain actions or customs without also understanding the culture from which those actions are derived. On the other side, the *diversity thesis* simply asserts that there is a diversity of moral opinions from one society to another, thus there is no *consensus gentium*² concerning morals: what is regarded as right in one society is regarded as wrong in another (Ladd, 1973, p. 109). With *diversity thesis*, therefore there has always been an irreducible diversity of cultural patterns, institutions, economy, language, personality, as well as a diversity of moral beliefs, rules, and practices. With regards to these, there are no invariables, no universals (Ladd, 1973, p. 3). Although most contemporary cultural relativists combine these two theses together, it is possible to accept one without another.

Ladd furthermore summarizes the essence of these two theses by revealing the connections between them in these schematic forms written as follow:

- (a) morality is essentially dependent on other factors, says, a factor X
- (b) factor X varies from society to society (or from class to class, from individual to individual, etc.)
- (c) therefore, morality is relative and varies from society to society, and so on

Accordingly, since these two ethical theses harmonize to support relativist’s standpoint, one should acknowledge the important arguments against these two ethical theories; the two forms of anti-relativism. The first thesis that is argued in opposition to the dependency thesis is called *absolutism*. Absolutists believe that there are a set of universal rules that apply to all cultures, to all people, at all times (Kraft, 2017). This concept is similar to the universal characteristics of International Style, which are composed with rectilinear forms without any ornamentation. However, an action due

² Consensus gentium derived from Latin for “agreement of the people.” The phrase is meant “that which is universal among men carries the weight of truth.”

to absolutism is either always right or it is always wrong which is opposed to relativists who accept that concepts of right and wrong are variable depending on the circumstances.

The second thesis is called *universalism* which denies the diversity thesis. Moral universalism, which could be called *moral objectivism* or *universal morality*, is the ethical position that the system of ethics applies universally for “all similarly situated individuals,” regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or any other distinguishing feature (Gowans, 1997). It is a universal ethic that transcends culture and personal whim. The source or justification of this system is variously claimed to be human nature, a shared vulnerability to suffering, which its reasons are the based common themes among existing moral codes, or the mandates of religion (Mastin, 2008). This could be likened to High Modernism of the 1950s and 60s. A belief that a form of Modernity could be a mean to reorder the social and natural world by disregarding the historical, geographical, and social context in development. However, it is obvious that these two anti-relativist ethical theories fail to capture the true meaning of “diversity” and “relativism.”

Even though, ethical relativism may seem to affirm that the equal validity of every moral principle or

moral code should be accepted by any society and the same actions can be both right and wrong and neutral. If *any* principle is acceptable, *everything* is permitted. In as much as rightness and wrongness ordinarily have meaning only through their exclusion of alternatives, this perception will also destroy the distinction between right and wrong (Ladd, 1973, p. 9). On the other hand, scholars Benedict and Fisher, believe in the reasons that the moral principles have a limited validity and their validity has a limited range in that they are binding only on those within a particular group. Hence, no one has the right to pass judgement on another society's ethics or to impose ethics on another society. According to Ladd, that ideology would be classified as “ethnocentrism.” Therefore, to better understand cultural and ethical diversities “one ought to treat the ethics of other societies with tolerance, resilience, respect, and understanding.” As Benedict proposes: “The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values ... [In recognizing it] we shall arrive then at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence” (as cited in Ladd, 1973, p. 9). Hopefully all international architects and city planners will acknowledge the importance of Ethical Relativism and Critical Regionalism, and comprehend them in their works.



Figure 4:
The setting of traditional Thai houses, raised highly on stilts and topped with gabled roof.
(Source: <http://www.asianoasisblog.com/tales-along-the-river-part-i/>)

FROM INFLUENCES TO EXCHANGES

Conflicts between Western globalization and non-Western localization, and between International Modernism and Critical Regionalism mainly results from the idea of Eurocentrism. Depicting cultures through a single lens, rather than from diverse historical evolutions. In the West, the dominant conception of history and modernity has been studied from a supposition that there is only one center, a *Eurocentrism*. Its rational foundation is based on the Western *Ethnocentric ideal*, which is a point of view that one's own way of life, the West, is to be preferred to all others. Although outside of this stream of Euro-American culture, the issue is taken for granted and is to be viewed as a factor making for individual adjustment and social integration. This movement thus supports Melville J. Herskovits' *Ethnocentrism* analysis, "[F]or strengthening of the ego, identification with one's own group, whose ways are implicitly accepted as best, is all important. It is rationalized and made the basis of the programs of action detrimental to the well-being of other peoples that it gives rise to serious problem" (Ladd, 1973, p. 66).

The outcome of Eurocentric ego is also revealed in the following architectural products of the non-West that *the Other* has been absorbing Western social and cultural theories without any self-conscious awareness. Comprised of an eagerness to join Modernity, "...the otherness (the non-West) could not be allowed to remain as otherness, for in order for Western audiences to appropriate it in some way, the strange had to be made familiar" (Xiaomei, 1995, p. 99-117). Banister Fletcher, considered the following non-Western architecture as "non-historical styles," i.e. styles that lack history and are only marked with ornamental excesses—a body without spirit (as cited in Lim, 2003, p. 95). As a consequence, a serious problem has occurred: every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources: how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization (as cited in Frampton, 1983, p. 16).

In this manner, the historical process of building a Eurocentric culture and society does root a *placelessness* crisis as all the non-Western civilization as well as its arts and architecture is relegated to the peripheral other. Lim (2003, p. 65) hence illustrates this as an example:

[I]t is now acknowledged that many non-Western cultures have different conceptions of time, e.g. the Buddhist perception of cyclical time, and differing governing criteria for self-development and relationships, e.g. the Confucius-based code of conduct particularly in relation to fairness, respect, and consideration. A pluralistic perception of history and modernity including the *Modernity of the Other* is now generally accepted. Official history through the ages inevitably reflected the rich and powerful. Much of the distorted colonial history has yet to be contested and rewritten. The history of the poor and the impoverished often lacked voice and support for its rediscoveries. Its voices are submerged, suppressed and often forgotten.

As a consequence, the understanding of the importance of conserving the notions attached to a particular place is lost in various dimensions; from pedagogy, methodology, to sensibility.

Therefore, instead of interpreting the world's diversity through one narrow perspective, of which one is superior than others, Janet Abu-Lughod once proposed a counter historical theory in her writing, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250-1350*, regarding a world system prior to the sixteenth-century structure.

Abu-Lughod's world-system consists of the linkage between three subsystems, or cores; China, the most advanced; the Arab World, essentially Egypt and the Near East; and bringing up the rear chronologically, Western Europe's role in the thirteenth-century world economy, she is insistent on the point that there was nothing inherently superior in the technological, cultural, psychological, or economic structures inherent in Western civilization that could have foretold the ultimate dominance of Europe over Wallestein's sixteenth-century world-system that "reconstructed" out of the "devotion" of the thirteenth-century structure. ... All three areas were riding a simultaneous tide of economic expansion and prosperity that carried them along in symbiosis. None of the thirteenth-century subsystems was "hegemonic" over the whole and none constituted a core hegemony such as northwest Europe did in the sixteenth-century system (Blomquist, 1990, p. 362).

Abu-Lughod's theory could be best exemplified by an architectural example given by a Thai prominent architect, Sumet Jumsai. He likewise proposed

his non-West controversial theory opposed to the West that the early Asian settlements could have been generated by aquatic instinct and tradition, which means that the cultures of Southeast Asian region were only a by-product of Indian and Chinese cultural influences (Jumsai, 1988). His proposition was also supported by the author's article on Southeast Asia, "Nowhere to Somewhere and Beyond," where Clarence Aasen was quoted,

[M]ost important, and increasingly explored and accepted, is the possibility that there have been significant indigenous underpinnings for their cultural development: that they were not entirely, or even primarily, derivative, and that the foreign factors should be viewed less as "influences" and more as "ex- changes" (Lim, 1999, p. 17-29).

This concept has provoked an awakening question for the architectural and urban-planning professionals who are supposed to be the ones responsible for making decisions and creating city planning, plans based on a different region—to inscribe architecture with the character of a region and hence to express the place in which the work is intrinsically situated (Frampton, 1983, p. 21).

The first and foremost important consciousness that should be endorsed, along with the professional responsibility, is an awareness of Ethical Relativism. According to this interpretation, an act of planning is right or wrong whenever the majority in any given society approves or disapproves of it, respectively (Regan, 1983, p. 131). By following a call of Critical Regionalism, the highest aims are to respect and preserve the differences in

local cultures, climates, and topographies. Even though the Regionalist attempts might seem to resist the ongoing march of homogenization in contemporary society it reveals an undercurrent of conservatism that is in opposition to the technologies of modernization (Phillips, 2003, p. 7). In solidarity with many high-speed developments, the product of both architectural and city-planning practices should be built upon a "contemporary vernacular," no matter if it is considered in terms of Eurocentric modernity or grounded in particular local traditions; its transformation should adequately serve the contemporary conditions.

These actions can be seen in the architecture of the 2012 Pritzker Prize Laureate, Wang Shu, as his works resonate with local place and memory. Wang Shu's architecture is exemplary in its strong sense of cultural continuity and reinvigorates tradition. Within the realm of recent debate of urbanizing China, Wang Shu's work is able to transcend the issues of whether architecture should be anchored in tradition or should look only toward the future. Should it, at the same time generate an architecture that is timeless, and deeply rooted in its context and yet be universal? (Figure 5 and 6). The commitment of building responsible architecture arising from a sense of a specific culture and place corresponds to the belief in Ethical Relativism since it claims particular social, cultural, historical, or personal circumstances. Above all, "respecting" is a key; respect the custom of others following the principle of Ethical Relativism. It seems evident that either the relativists or the general population should either believing in the same moral norms or different societies need the same kind of response and restraint that is proper with regard to customs.

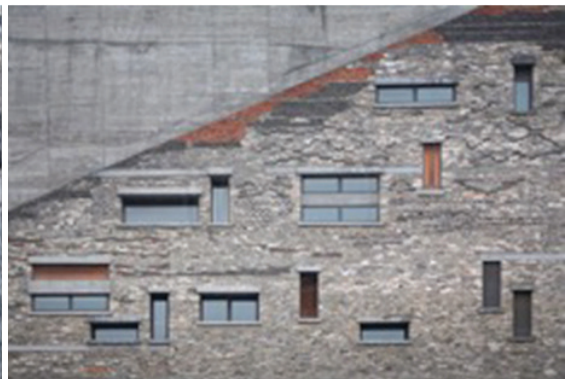


Figure 5 and 6:
Wang Shu's Ningbo History Museum built from the remains of demolished villages.
(Source: <http://www.archdaily.com/14623/ningbo-historic-museum-wang-shu-architect>
<http://www.archdaily.com/867419/kenneth-frampton-on-the-work-of-wang-shu-and-lu-wenyu>)

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