

Modern Regionalism

Critical regionalism philosophy examined in design class at Lincoln.

An opportunity to exercise theory and create a meaningful design is an exciting intellectual challenge for any designer. Designers express ideas through tangible manifestations; yet it is an abstract and poetic dimension that goes beyond straightforward problem-solving which differentiates landscape design from engineering. Thus, when a theory is able to contribute and inspire that added dimension it is most welcome. Bruno Gilmour was introduced to critical regionalism philosophy through a design theory paper taught by Professor Simon Swaffield in the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture programme at Lincoln University. Bruno realised the potential for critical regionalism to bind his project ideas together and justify his design decisions at the various scales.

As New Zealand is swept into the economic globalisation process the threat of creating 'landscapes of anywhere' is a common trap that landscape architects try to avoid. Ideas of critical regionalism originated from the negation of capitalist manipulation of consumer architecture, which is viewed as an aggressive invasion of local identity and expression. As such, critical

regionalism attempts to resist the homogenising of the built environment by "a commitment to place rather than to space" (Frampton, 1983:162) and to build on the local rather than the global. Critical regionalism philosophy contends that locality or particularity of place is not "a simplistic evocation of a sentimental or ironic vernacular" (Frampton, 1983:162) as some postmodern architecture manifested, but a deeper expression of place. Critical regionalism thus necessitates an analytical awareness of what makes a place unique, balanced with a discerning importation of ideas, forms and techniques from the world outside the region. Critical regionalism looks to the local environment and culture for influence, grounding design in the patterns and forms, both human and non-human in origin, that make the place particular. Governing inspiration may be found in the topography of a particular site, in a tectonic derived from a particular structural mode, aspects of the local climate as well as social and cultural characteristics.

CRITICAL REGIONALISM IN WHAINGAROA-RAGLAN

Whaingaroa-Raglan is a rugged west coast environment located forty minutes west of Hamilton. The town is nestled among steep hills, with massive iron sand dunes, a raging ocean beach, a vast shallow harbour, rocky headlands and some of the best surf in the country. Whaingaroa was once one of the busiest ports in New Zealand. Today, it is tourism which plays a significant role in the local economy. The town's population has the bicultural mix and community awareness that

Aotearoa holds as an ideal. The place, however, is about to face changes as increases in the populations of Auckland and Hamilton, combined with the improvement of the road over the hills of the Deviation, are likely to boost Raglan's appeal as a place in which to live. Tourist flows are likely to increase as well. As a result, a doubling of Raglan's population from its present 3000 is seen as inevitable over the next ten to fifteen years. Exponential growth in a place that has percolated to its present form has the potential to seriously compromise the regional character. This combination of a strong provincial identity and a considerable reliance on the outside world made the project an ideal testing ground for the theory of critical regionalism.

Below: Raglan landscape.



DESIGN INTENT

Bruno's design facilitates Whaingaroa-Raglan's predicted exponential growth while judiciously incorporating outside influences. This involved consolidating and reinforcing the particularity of Raglan, creating a strong unity of form that will cater to visitors without compromising the lifestyle and needs of the resident population. The aim was not to freeze frame the place in 2000, but to imagine a projection of Whaingaroa-Raglan into a more mature phase.

It was thus imperative to the design that at each scale Bruno should critically analyse the social and physical surroundings and respond appropriately. The surrounding landscape features played a role in inspiring forms and colours throughout the design.

At the town planning scale a new residential area is proposed. The layout responds to the hilly topography while acknowledging the original grid pattern that was planned in England in the mid nineteenth century. Since Raglan's landscape was not flat, the actual place resulted in an interesting meandering fabric which characterises the built environment. The new area preserves that character without compromising the logic and efficiency of a layout that fits the particular site.

Current global environmental awareness among Raglan's population underlines further decision making. To reinforce the strong community sense that exists, a pedestrian and bicycle link is proposed between the new residential area and nodes within Raglan. A critical part of the connection is the Greywater Greenway. The increase in population will necessitate further sewage facilities. Present sewage facilities are close to the Maori pa, hence, for cultural reasons, it did not seem appropriate to expand those. A shallow valley area, presently zoned residential and adjacent to a wetland remnant, was seen as an opportunity to accommodate a basic need. Instead of hiding the human waste, Bruno proposes to express the process while rejuvenating the landscape. Greywater on its way to the sea is polished through a series of reed bed cells amongst regenerating native bush, creating habitat for native plants and animals. Revealing the Greywater cleansing process and making it part of the everyday landscape experience reinforces integrity. This ecological dimension of the design ties into contemporary national and international trends in landscape architecture; at the same time it is site specific, maintaining local individuality.

Focusing on a smaller scale, the design proposes a waterfront market in the revitalised downtown area. This area is easily accessible from the Greywater Greenway. The layout was inspired by the encounter of moving through the natural environments of Raglan, a meandering experience of discovery. Also influenced by the wandering nature of the

original street pattern, the area incorporates contemporary ideas of shared vehicle and pedestrian space. The new design fits into the organic nature of the township while at the same time accommodating the global cafe-culture which is percolating into New Zealand towns.

The focal point of this area is a large sculpture, subtly manifesting Whaingaroa's particularity. Approached from a distance, the numerous stainless steel poles seem to be in a random cluster, the light gleaming on them as it does on a curling wave. Closer inspection reveals order as the poles spiral outward, the gaps between them increasing exponentially as they follow the ground pattern of a stylised nautilus shell. The ground plane is tilted, creating informal seating, while referring to the local tectonic forms of sandstone terraces, the subsiding gun emplacement in the harbour, and regional pa terraces. Local pa were a strong influence on the design, inspiring the angled poles, reminiscent of pa fortifications, while Te Horea pa site is framed through the hole in the sculpture's central mast. Local sandstone and iron sand tones, as seen in the sculpture's ground treatment, create a traditional Maori colour combination.

Critical regionalism provided a theoretical tool which directed Bruno throughout the design process. The critical awareness had granted regionalism the opportunity to be manifested without isolationism, allowing the place to have integrity in its own right as well as occupy a legitimate place in the larger world. ■■

REFERENCES:

Frampton, K. (1983). *Critical Regionalism. Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 20:147-162.

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Top: Sculpture
Middle: Greywater Greenway
Bottom: Downtown area

