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Kenneth Frampton apropos tectonic: on the high-wire of a definition

Kenneth Frampton, architectural critic and Columbia University professor, responds to the criticism that has been levelled at his notion of the 'tectonic' in this interview with Paulo Martins Barata. Frampton views the tectonic as a way of resisting both the 'speculator' economy of mass-produced construction and the 'atectonic' architecture of Post-Modernism and Post-Structuralism. At the same time, he acknowledges the quixotic nature of an idea that is 'a kind of rearguard response to the commodification of architecture'. The interview is set in context by Martins Barata.

The term 'tectonic' comes to us by cryptic derivations from Sanskrit to Greek, but it was only in the German 'foundling period' (Gründerzeit) in the nineteenth century that it received specific architectural meaning in the writings of authors like Gottfried Semper and Karl Boetticher. The debate about the meaning of 'tectonics' went on throughout the nineteenth century in an inconclusive and exculpatory effort to unify objectivity and subjectivity (Schwarzer, 1995). Never really thought of as a movement, that debate can best be understood as an open polemic between Symbolism and mechanical Utilitarianism, between the aesthetic theory of Idealism and pre-modern Functionalism. With the progressive ascent of Modern purposefulness (Zweckhaftigkeit) the debate eventually lost meaning, until it finally dissolved in the minute and complex derivations of Semper's disciples, dismissed as 'positivists' by the young Viennese art-historian Alois Riegl while countering-his own thesis of the 'will-to-art' (Kunstwillen) (Gombrich, 1996).

Despite Semper's lasting influence on such disparate architects as Wagner, Muthesius, Berlage, Behrens, and Loos, 'the split between the tectonic conception of architecture in favor of a more eminently spatial conception' was put forward by August Schmarsow in 1896, describing it as 'the formation of space (Raumgestaltung) through the notion of empathy (Einfühlung)' (Anderson, 1981).

The imaginative, dynamic and involuntary projection of self into the architectural object, without which the architectural experience would be purely intellectual or associative (Martins Barata, 1998). That same kind of experience seems to have been presaged in this passage from Goethe's Werther:

'The garden of which I speak is very simple and, upon entering, we understand at first sight that he who planned it was not a gardener by profession, but someone with a sensitive heart who took pleasure in seeing himself reflected in it'.

Kenneth Frampton (1996a) calls this the 'corporeal metaphor', the recognition that architectural space is part of a sensorial experience 'where the body reconstitutes the world through its tactile appropriation of reality'. Comparable to Schmarsow's notion of empathy, Frampton's corporeal metaphor essentializes the Post-Modern or semiotic emphasis on the abstract values of sign and reference. To that extent, Frampton (1996b) returns to the centre of the architectural debate with the premise (radical for many) that 'the built is first and foremost a construction and only later a discourse based on surface, volume and plan'.

Asserting that architecture is of necessity an anachronistic human activity, he returns us to the Husserlian notion of 'things-in-themselves', and of the Heideggerian place of dwelling. In this complex theoretical structure, the notion of tectonic suggests itself as a critical strategy to resist the perverse consequences of the Venturian 'decorated shed', the cultural appropriation of Deconstructivism, and the ever-increasing media-type of the architecture culture, which Frampton has...
previously countered with his notion of Critical Regionalism.

Framptonian thought, if it may be referred to in these terms, operates with evident integrity within the limits of its own contradictions. In Studies in Tectonic Culture, Frampton creates what could be regarded an alternative interpretation of modern architectural history, revealing the discred it which the physical imperatives of construction have been subject to for years. Yet, if, as Frampton (1998) argues, 'it is no longer self-evident that the once progressive trajectory of modernization will have a positive outcome,' there arises an essential contradiction in this interpretation, as pointed out by Harry Mallgrave (1996); it becomes difficult to assert the tectonic (and technological) base of architecture without seeing its representational capacity weakened. That creates a hermeneutic circle that echoes the central paradox of Modernism, as Paul Ricoeur (1961) has observed: 'How to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.'

Perhaps no other contemporary author has found so much resistance to his thought as Frampton, the very mentor of a 'culture of resistance.' Implicitly forged under the late-Marxist dialectics of the Frankfurt school, the critical structure of Frampton thought emphasizes the representational and ontological aspects of architecture, which for some, is an all too simple equation, incapable of becoming a viable alternative to the just-in-time post-Fordism to which architectural practice seems inevitably moving.

Frampton's idea of a tectonic culture does have its genealogy, running from Paul Cret, who was influenced by Labrouste and Viollet-le-Duc, through Frank Lloyd Wright, influenced by Sullivan and the Semper-inspired Chicago school, to Louis Kahn. Despite its ambiguity and problematic autonomy, the idea of a tectonic culture passes, in more ways than one, from one generation to another to include such different figures as Jorn Utzon, Carlo Scarpa, and Renzo Piano. Beyond the historical circumstances that may or may not connect these architects, one cannot but wonder as to the relevance of a genealogy as a critical instrument. Challenging the vision of tectonics as an essential (or exclusive) expression of a pan-Germanic worldview (Weltschaung), Kenneth Frampton, in his own peculiar style, offers a panoptic, generous and yet polemic definition for the tectonic. Perhaps here closer than ever to Ricoeur's paradox, Frampton intuitively invites us to visit that very same garden that enchanted Goethe's young Werther.

'The evocation of the tectonic at the end of the century presupposes a kind of rearguard response to the commodification of architecture'

A simple-minded masking of reality, as opposed to its mediation, is not necessarily the only consequence from our accelerated amortization of the built environment. While we are ever more immersed in consumerist imagery this does not mean that in the name of economic simulation architecture has had to be reduced to a set of supposedly seamless scenographic representations; to Las Vegas as the non plus ultra of civilization. While there is adequate evidence that the increased mechanization and electrification of the habitat has had the effect of reducing the amount expended on


The interview
Martins Barata: Your most recent book, Studies in Tectonic Culture (MIT Press, 1996) reopens a long forsaken debate on the ever-problematic role of building in architecture culture. As you put it, the built is first and foremost a construction and only later an abstract discourse based on surface, volume and plan. In view of the escalating commodification of architecture and amortization of the building type at large, the prospects for the tectonic seem ill-fated. Is the tectonic to become a culture of the affluent and institutional or can you foresee some realistic escape routes for a wider democratic spectrum?

Frampton: The evocation of the tectonic at the end of the century presupposes a kind of rearguard response to the commodification of architecture, so one has to admit that there is something quixotic about it from the start. On the other hand, building art (Baukunst) once it goes beyond the primordial has always been involved with some measure of concealing and revealing.

In his seminal book Tecktonik der Hollemen of 1850, Karl Boetticher is at pains to distinguish, with reference to the Doric column, between the core of the superimposed, stone cylinders out of which the column is composed and the artform of the fluting that serves simultaneously to unify the shaft and to refine the tapering entasis of its form. We may think of this exchange between the core form and the art form as being symptomatic of the dialogical interplay between concealing and revealing in all tectonic form. The stone cylinders are partially concealed (or masked) by the flutes in order to reveal (or bring forth) the column itself. At bottom the flutes are a specific cultural mediation of the brute, rough-cut stonework from which the column is assembled.

'The evocation of the tectonic at the end of the century presupposes a kind of rearguard response to the commodification of architecture'
Paulo Martins Barata has provided the following commentary to the map: To fully understand this map one should perhaps be familiar with the peculiar sense of humour of the British scholars. Kenneth Frampton visited Portugal in the last week of June 1998 to present an abridged Portuguese translation of Studies in Tectonic Culture that he edited for the occasion. He had not been to Portugal for over 15 years, despite the civil influence Álvaro Siza and Portuguese architects had on his theoretical frame. With limited time and a bit of catching up to do, we crisscross the country from top to bottom considerably above the designated European speed limits – thus, Paulo ‘Tango’ Martins Barata.

Bulgarian consular Lisbon we stumbled across the cryptic clubhouse politics of the Order of Architects, alias, with minor differences, the late-modern version of Nomenklatura, as most of these professional bodies now seem to be.

Morelos de Sade: Apropos the tradition of ‘otherness’, in the middle of Alentejo we attempted admission to the Foundation of the Castle of Crato, a renovation by the talented and secluded Lusamere graduate, António Teixeira Guerra. With considerable advantage, he appears to have been living there – inside the castle and in the 1990s, ever since.

Sheep and Cork: In Alentejo, the unrivaled Portuguese pastoralism, Frampton found home to his most recent fixation – landscape architecture. Accordingly, and not entirely without reason, he suggested that, notwithstanding much has been built, our only hope lies in covering it with green, no matter what.

For de Rose: In Alentejo, we went to the impressive monastery of the Order of Christ recently changed into a state hotel by the architect Carlos Costa Craps.

Jotací: Álvaro Siza’s young and bright Russian assistant, who joined us for dinner at the Béia Nova tea house, in Matoceiros.

WW: stands for William Wang, the eminent director of the Deutsches Architektur Museum in Frankfurt, with whom we had lunch in the old Ribeiña district, in Porto.

JPS: stands for José Paulo dos Santos, an old friend of Frampton who joined us with Wang. Former editor of OAB, he was architect for the notable renovation of the Convent of Arcalio, that we also visited, and recipient of the Bundes Deutscher Architekten prize 1998 for a kindergarten in Berlin.

Marcelo da Conceição: The small northern town where lies Siza’s recently acclaimed design for the local church and parish centre.

Castle, convents, monasteries and churches, architects and journeymen, peasants and intellectuals, sheep and olive trees, books and conferences, lunches and dinners, highways and towns of cork, and in the middle of the week he still managed to go to Switzerland and return.

No other scholar could be as global as the one who comes up with Critical Regionalism. Frampton stands alone. What is it he wrote? ‘Who is Philip Fug, or around the world in five and half days’.
the body of any building, we may set against this the rationalization of building production that has already been demonstrated at many levels by the so-called High-Tech architects. In such work we can see how the reduction of the enclosing membrane of a building to a rationalized ‘product-form’, still leaves open the entire spectrum of the constructive assembly with all its joints and seams that may be articulated tectonically in terms of revealing and concealing.

The investment in institutional form versus the lesser amount spent on the habitat in general is not only understandable in terms of socio-cultural continuity, but also something that has always existed, notwithstanding the advent of democracy and universal suffrage. All the same, despite the cultural homogenization of the global economy, different societies still allocate quite different levels of resources to the built environment just as they are still able to redistribute the wealth of their societies in distinctly different ways to specifically different ends. This is also the outcome of varying democratic traditions.

... the term “tectonic” has given rise to criticism from a broad spectrum of scholarship, in what some perceive as moralistic overtones and others as historical inaccuracy.

Obviously, one cannot introduce tectonic refinements, however modest, if the sole logic of the enterprise is to build as cheaply as possible no matter what. The tectonic is equally inimicable to the populist ‘speculator’ economy of the so-called, home building industry; that is to say the proliferation of a chaotic, exurban residential fabric throughout the late modern world. Needless to say this apocalyptic form of land settlement, driven by the automobile, has tragic dimensions that culturally and economically go well beyond our mandarin preoccupations with the tectonic.

Martins Barata: Your definition of the term ‘tectonic’ has given rise to criticism from a broad spectrum of scholarship, in what some perceive as moralistic overtones and others as historical inaccuracy. In the last analysis it is as if the German-speaking world had been held up for its elected term to see it ascribed to rather different cultures (arguably the Caribbean but had little German to it). The point in case seems to be an instrumental use of history. Do you perceive a potential operability in the analytical use of the term ‘tectonic’? Or can we anticipate the impending doom on yet another short-lived buzzword of architectural criticism?

Frampton: My use of the term tectonic is polemical and critical and therefore instrumental by definition. It is, as Massimo Cacciari put it of Mies van der Rohe, a means by which to resist and proceed. Thus it may be regarded as operative but we may well ask, after the British historian E. H. Carr, what history is not in some way operative; that is to say committed in its mode of beholding to certain values rather than others? This hardly makes it moralistic even if it will, of necessity, encroach upon the ethical.

As far as fashion is concerned the tectonic has already become a buzzword, since we live in a world in which everything is readily absorbable. But it is hardly more of a buzzword than any other adjectival nouns or gerunds. The fact is that all such terms are only effective as initial referents in any given critical discourse. What counts in the end in any analysis is in what way may an element or a relationship be said to be tectonic and to what particular expressive end and in relation to which specific set of values and so on.

Naturally I realize that in terms of cultural history there is something aboriginally German about the architectural use of the term tectonic. I do not deny this but this does not mean that very similar ideas were not entertained by the French: by Henri Labrouste, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Auguste Perret which is certainly one of the main arguments advanced at the beginning of Studies in Tectonic Culture. I hardly see how this amounts to historical inaccuracy but perhaps this is not the specific objection to which you are referring.

Martins Barata: Accordingly, the tectonic is open to the inflections of your own rather eccentric distinction between ‘the ontological and the representational’. In the Bay of Naples, between Paestum’s Magna Graecia and Roman Pompei, one finds the technological and symbolic quantum leap that separates the Greek stereotomic piling from the cladled and plastered arch of the Roman engineer. It seems that from thereon the building-act could never do without some measure of the representational, of the masking. Yet you argue that architecture is fundamentally ontological. Could you comment on this?

Frampton: Despite my evident susceptibility to certain aspects of Heidegger’s ontic thought, I go out of my way in Studies in Tectonic Culture to insist on the inescapable interdependence of the representational and the ontological in tectonic form; ‘the difference, that is, between the skin that represents the

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composite character of the construction and the core of a building that is simultaneously both its fundamental structure and its substance’ (p.16). In the same passage I paraphrase Harry Mallgrave to the effect that ‘Semper remained somewhat undecided
as to the relative expressivity of structure and cladding, hesitating between the symbolic expressivity of construction as a thing in itself – rationally modulated from both a technical and an aesthetic standpoint – and a symbolic elaboration of the cladding irrespective of its underlying structure. I also cite Mallgrave for positioning a reconciliation between these poles in which the symbolic (the representational) and the constructional (the ontological) are alternatively revealed and concealed, although admittedly, my insistence on using the bracketed terms is some measure of my eccentricity as you put it.

Martins Barata: The ‘tectonic’ offers its dialectical counterpart in the definition of the ‘atectonic’. The latter is made evident, say, in the canonical early White Moderns where the expressive interaction of structure, construction and material is purposely undermined in favour of all-encompassing resilient mass. Yet these buildings are no less to architecture culture than those that could be inscribed within a tectonic trajectory. Arguably we could conceive a sequel in the form of Studies in Atectonic Culture that would be just as determinate to architectural criticism. To what extent do you place a qualitative value in the tectonic?

Frampton: Clearly the so-called ‘white’ architecture of the heroic Modern Movement is as much a part of the rich architectural heritage of the twentieth century as any other cultural manifestation. However, despite Hitchcock and Johnson’s reductive characterization of the International Style as some kind of dematerialized, planar vacuum, skeletal construction, what this abstract, aetecomic, ‘white’ amounted to, on closer examination, is a good deal more complex. We tend to forget that, after the first decade of his practice, Le Corbusier abandoned the tenets of his purism, turning, on the one hand, towards an evocation of Neo-Classicism and, on the other hand, to the precepts of Constructivism, while at the same time making his first interpretative excursion into the vernacular – his Maison Errozuris of 1931.

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‘one can only cite the current tendency to reduce the art of architecture to inexpensive imagery, packaging and ‘spectacular’ sculptural effects’

As I have already indicated, my very partial re-reading of the architectural history of this century was intended to trace an ‘other’ Modern tradition coexisting with and occasionally overlapping the main avant-garde line which you have elected as atecomic. This attempt to trace the trajectory of another Modernity was, as I have already indicated, overtly polemical. It was and remains an attempt to document and reinterpret the immediate past as a ‘site of resistance’. As to the target of this resistance, one can only cite the current tendency to reduce the art of architecture to inexpensive imagery, packaging and ‘spectacular’ sculptural effects. The value of the tectonic resides in its potential as a conceptual fulcrum, with which to resist this seductive but corrosive aestheticism.

Martins Barata: In the article ‘Between Earthwork and Rooftop’, forthcoming in LOTUS, you broach the increasingly problematic tendency to reduce architecture to fine art as we find this, say, in the work of Frank Gehry or in that of many other late-modern architects who are clearly tempted by the media and prestige of art to go beyond the limitations of architecture. The example is clear: no one dares to request the artist to change the colour of a painting, but alas, even to the renowned architect the client will not hesitate to claim formal changes, thus the discipline seemingly finds temporary shelter in artworld. Notwithstanding other moments in the history of Enlightenment, this allegiance seems unbalanced at this point. Could you comment on this?

Frampton: Well, this question patently grows out of the previous one and, in a sense, mounts a further challenge to my possibly quixotic insistence that architecture is not an autonomous fine art, in the sense that literature, music, painting, sculpture and possibly even theatre and film are. Architecture, as I am inclined to repeat, is distinct from other artistic modes in that it is intrinsically mixed up with the ‘life-world’ and is thus as much a living context for

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culture as it is a culture in and of itself. This distinction may not implicate the tectonic in any particular way but none the less it provides a ground from which to attempt to define the autonomy of the field as opposed to the other arts mentioned above. In this regard I have opted to start with the rather obvious thesis that architecture is, first, the constructed assembly of physical material for the accommodation of social life. Only secondarily, although possibly more obviously, is it a spatial matrix. This reserve with respect to the spatial is also polemical, in that it challenges the elision between the spatial and the figuratively abstract which has played such a fertile role in the evolution of the Modern Movement but which, at the same time, has rendered it particularly vulnerable to dissolving the boundaries that separate the province of architecture from the expressivity of art.
Note
1. In discussion with Professor Werner Uebschini, director of the GTA at the ETH in Zurich.

References

Biography
Paulo Martins Barata is a partner of Promontorio Arquitectos, in Lisbon. He is author of Avaro Siza 1954-1976 (Blau GG, Lisbon, 1998) and was recently Cass Gilbert Visiting Faculty at the University of Minnesota.