

IF OUR COUNTRY  
WERE RULED BY  
A TYRANT AND  
BECAUSE OF HIM  
OUR HOMETOWN  
SUFFERED THE

NEW

EST AND MOST  
SOPHISTICATED  
HIGH TECH BOMB  
ARDEMENT BY  
THE MIGHTIEST  
ARMIES IN THE

WORLD

AND AFTER THAT  
THEY WENT BACK  
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SPOTIC BLOODY

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Los presentes letreros fueron fabricados en la Public Sign Shop de Columbus, Ohio, e instalados por operarios municipales en el City Center Drive —una calle no precisamente céntrica ni populosa—, dentro de la exposición *New Currents: Recent Art in Spain*, inaugurada en la conmovedora fecha del 12 de octubre de 1991.

Escasamente dos semanas más tarde, las quejas y presiones de los veteranos de la oficialmente denominada *Operación Tormenta del Desierto* —y otros que, aún sin serlo, compartían su santa indignación— hicieron que la autoridad competente —que había mostrado anteriormente su acuerdo, autorizando, subvencionando, fabricando e instalando la obra— reparara en su carácter de “objectionable”, “unnappropriate” y “non-conforming traffic devices”, procediendo a su desmantelamiento.

lamiento.

Días después, al calor de la polémica, el Wexner Center for the Arts, un centro cultural dentro del campus de la Universidad Estatal de Ohio, se ofreció a dar cobijo y a exhibir las señales al amparo de su condición de espacio expositor de obras de arte, empresa que coronó con éxito hasta la fecha prevista para finalizar la exposición.

*These present signs, made in the public Sign Shop of Columbus, Ohio, and installed by municipal workers on City Center Drive —a street neither central neither particularly populous— in the exhibition, New Currents: Recent Art from Spain, opened on the sympathetic date of October 12, 1991.*

*Scarcely two weeks later, the complaints and pressures of the*

*veterans of the officially designated Operation Desert Storm —and others who, without being veterans, shared their righteous indignation— forced the relevant authority —who previously had given his permission, authorizing, subsidizing, fabricating and installing the work— reconsider their character, calling the signs “objectionable”, “unappropriate” and “non-conforming traffic devices”, and ordering the dismantlement.*

*A few days afterwards, in the heat of the polemic, The Wexner Center for the Arts, a cultural center inside the Ohio State University, offered itself to house and exhibit the signs under the aegis of its functions an exhibition space for works of art, an arrangement crowned with success until the foreseen date for concluding the exhibition.*

ROGELIO LÓPEZ-CUENCA

**“SI NUESTRO PAÍS ESTUVIERA GOBERNADO POR UN TIRANO, Y POR SU CULPA NUESTRA CIUDAD SUFRIERA EL MÁS NUEVO Y SOFISTICADO BOMBARDEO DE ALTA TECNOLOGÍA DEJÁNDONOS BAJO EL EXPOLIO DE UN ORDEN DÉSPOTA SANGRIENTO TRAS LA BATIDA EN RETIRADA DE LOS EJÉRCITOS MÁS PODEROSOS DEL MUNDO”.**

Del catálogo de la exposición *New Currents. Recent Art in Spain*, llevada a cabo en Columbus, Ohio, octubre/diciembre, 1991. Rogelio López-Cuenca es artista y su obra ha sido revisada y comentada por él mismo en el número de la *Revista de Occidente* “Nueve artistas de hoy”, febrero, 1992.

*From the catalogue of the exhibition, New Current. Recent Art in Spain, exhibited in Columbus, Ohio, Oct.-Dec. 1991. Rogelio López Cuenca is an artist, and his work has been reviewed and discussed by him in the issue of Revista de Occidente “Nueve artistas de hoy” [Nine Artist of Today], February, 1992. Translated by Christopher Emsden.*

is tectonic solidity, or theatricality, closure, or openness. In observing the building the mind tends to oscillate between a number of hypotheses, none of which are completely confirmed or denied.

Another example is the housing recently built in Holland by Alvaro Siza. Here, Siza imitates, but rather indirectly, certain features of Dutch vernacular classicism; window proportions, materials, etc. Can this be called regionalism? If so, whose regionalism? But is not this question an absurdity? The one fact that could seem to be certain about a regionalist work is its ownership. If one wants to use the word

“regional” in such a context, one must see it as a second order system, filtered through the eclectic sensibility of a particular architect, the result of a voluntaristic interpretation of urbanistic values, one which takes into account existing urban forms as an artistic context. It is certainly not the confirmation of a living local tradition. The architectural codes that were once tied to the customs of semi-autonomous cultural regions have long ago been liberated from this dependence. If they are still used to reinforce local characteristics, it is because this is willed by architects. It is a matter of free choice. Localism and

traditionalism can therefore be seen as universal potentials, always lurking on the reverse face of modernization and rationalization.

One of the intentions of a regionalist approach was the preservation of “difference”. But difference, which used to be ensured by the coexistence of water-tight and autonomous regions of culture, now depend largely on two other phenomena: individualism, and the nation state. As regards individualism, the architect, as the agent through which the work of architecture is realized, is himself the product of modern rationalization and division of labor. Ten-



dencies which emphasis local architecture are no more privileged today than other ways of adapting architecture to the conditions of modernity. The combination of these various ways is the result of the choices of individual architects who are operating from within multiple codes.

In respect of the nation-state, inspite of the world-wide and almost instantaneous dissemination of technologies and codes, which results in an underlying similarity of the architecture in all Western countries at any one moment, it is usually possible to distinguish between the more typical products of different countries. In a sense, the nation-state is the modern "region" —a region in which culture is coextensive with political power. But this culture is of a different kind from that of the regions of the pre-industrial world. We may not quite agree with Ernst Renan when, in a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882, he denied that national boundaries were dictated by language, race, religion or any other "natural" factor. But at least we can admit the truth of his statement that what creates a nation is a will towards political unity, rather than any preexistent set of customs. These two functions may be co-extensive but they do not have to be. The need for placing regions that often differ from each other under a single political umbrella comes from the needs of the modern industrial economy. As Ernest Gellner has pointed out in his book, *Nations and Nationalism*, the reasons for the rise of the nation-state were the opposite of those underlying regional differentiation. Differences between regions were part of the structure of agrarian society. The needs of industrial society, on the contrary, demand a high degree of uniformity and the flattening out of local differences.

Perhaps it will be argued that this is not true in all cases. Recent events in Yugoslavia and the USSR have shown that old regional identities are still very much alive. But it is difficult to assess the status of regionalism in these cases, since it is obvious that ethnic emotions are being fanned for political reasons, i.e. reasons connected with the formation of modern nation-states, and the control of political power.

A more plausible exception may be made of the so-called third world —especially that part of the third world consisting of ancient cultures such as the Indian and the Islamic. In these countries, it will be argued, nationhood does coincide with living cultural traditions— traditions which are in conflict with the need for modernization. But however much we may hope that crucial aspects of these traditions may turn out to be conformable with modernization, we have

to admit that the modern technologies and cultural paradigms that increasingly predominate in the urban centres of these countries also affect the rural areas. In these societies, different historical times exist together, and under these circumstances it is already difficult to speak of "authentic" local traditions in a cultural field such as architecture. It may be strategically desirable to satisfy the demand for traditional forms with their socially embedded, allegorical meanings, even though the artistic and craftsmanlike traditions that originally supported them have begun to atrophy, due to prolonged contact with the west.

With these questions we come to the core of the problem. What is the relation between cultural patterns and technologies? The problem is, to some extent, obscured in the west, because industrialization evolved out of local cultural traditions, and adaptation to a (post) industrialized culture is already quite far advanced. The problem is glaring, however, in the East, because of the friction between two worlds and two times: the agrarian and the industrial. Are cultural patterns absolutely dependent on an industrial base, or can they maintain a certain independence? Is an industrialized culture irrevocably Eurocentric?

But these questions take me too far from my theme, and I would like to end by looking again at this problem from the point of view of the technologically advanced countries, and at the same time to sum up my observations on the concept of regionalism. Modern "post industrial" culture is more uniform than traditional cultures, because the means of production and dissemination are standardized and ubiquitous. But this uniformity seems to be compensated for by a flexibility that comes from the nature of modern techniques of communication, making it possible to move rapidly between codes and to vary messages to an unprecedented extent. This greater freedom, this ability of industrial society to tolerate difference within itself, however, does not follow the same laws that accounted for difference within traditional societies. In these societies, codes within a given cultural region were completely rigid. It was precisely this rigidity that accounted for the differences between different regions. In modern societies these regional differences are largely obliterated. Instead, there exist large, uniform cultural/political entities, within which differences of an unpredictable, unstable and random kind tend to develop.

The concept of regionality depends on it being possible to correlate cultural codes with geographical

regions. It is based on traditional systems of communication in which climate, geography, craft traditions and religions are absolutely determining. These determinants are rapidly disappearing and in large parts of the world no longer exist. That being the case, how is "value" established? Value now belongs to the world of freedom that Kant foretold at the end of the 18th century, whereas in earlier times it belonged to the world of necessity. Modern society, to repeat a cliché that is none the less true, is pluralistic. That is to say its codes are generated randomly from within a universal system of rationalization which, in itself, is "value free".

Clearly this way of generating meaning and difference in modern technological society has serious consequences for architecture, whose codes have always been even less amenable to individual and random manipulation than the other "arts", and more dependent on impersonal and imperative typologies and techniques. In the pre-industrialized world these technologies —summed up in the Greek word "Techné"— were connected with myths relating to the earth and the cosmos. In modern society "technique" is irreversibly disconnected from the phenomenal world of the visible, tangible experience, upon which such myths are built. In the modern media the process of means-ends abstraction has resulted in the re-routing of artistic codes from the stable to the apparently random.

This, then, is the problem of architecture in the modern world. It seems that it is no longer possible to envisage an architecture which has the stable, universal meanings that it had when it was connected with the soil and with the regions.

<sup>1</sup> Though the Irish revolt had started much earlier; its cultural and artistic manifestations belong to the 1890's.

<sup>2</sup> As had happened in the Balkans earlier in the century.