

MODERN ARCHITECTURE WITH "SOUL": A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH TO CHINESE REGIONAL CULTURE

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The aim of this paper is to develop the concept of Chinese architecture with "soul" that is the contemporary strategy of the representation of regional culture in China. Based on the analysis of critical regionalism and phenomenology of architecture the author devises a unique approach of "modern architecture with soul" which corresponds to the specific situation of Cultural identity in China that is characterised by diversity, regionalism and adherence to the principles of traditional Chinese philosophy. The strategy of "modern architecture with soul" follows the three principles: the Chinese culture as the "spirit", the materiality of architecture as the "skeleton" relevance and environmentalism as the "flesh and blood". They form a new direction to solve the current architectural problems in China through the expression of regional culture; explore a new way for the reasonable, healthy and sustainable development of contemporary architecture in view of the accelerating assimilation, rigidity and "overspeed development" of architecture in the globalizing world.

Keywords: the soul of architecture, genius loci, the spirit of the place, critical regionalism, phenomenology of architecture, contemporary architecture, regionalist approaches in architecture.

Introduction. Since the 1990s, the development of Chinese modern architecture is becoming increasingly rigid and uniform. The 21st century China embraced the so-called "starchitecture" with its pursuit of the superfluous and lavish. In search of spectacularism, Chinese developers and local government encourage architects to blindly pursue design solutions that aim to be higher, weirder, more exaggerated and extravagant in shape. Those solutions grab attention of the press, but destroy the urban fabric of the cities where they are introduced, as they lack any local and regional cultural connotation, understanding of history, nature, and human perception of the built environment. This trend disregards traditional cultural characteristics that had previously been present in the Chinese architecture. Chinese contemporary architecture lacks national cultural confidence, blindly advocates the architectural style of European and American modernism and post-modernism, and likes to invite international masters to design public buildings for China; from coastal

metropolises to inland cities, all cities blindly follow the trend. Because of this, Chinese architecture lacks a sense of identity that highlights its own national cultural value.

It is necessary for us to realize that modern architecture should develop in a different direction. In such a challenging environment, architecture should be based on resource conservation and sustainable development, meet people's needs, highlight cultural characteristics, and pay attention to people's emotional resonance and cultural identity. This paper aims to develop a strategy to manifest Chinese regional cultural identities in the architecture form. In Chinese context, this strategy could be defined as "Modern architecture with soul: a contemporary approach to regional culture". To define "modern architecture with soul", we need to distinguish the global prospective strategies that inject new vitality and soul into modern and contemporary architecture and explore a new way suitable for the reasonable, healthy and sustainable development of Chinese contemporary architecture, that is, "the contemporary approach to regional culture".

But what is the "soul" of architecture? In this paper, the "soul" of architecture especially refers to the embodiment of regional cultural identity that is based on local history, tradition, customs and national characteristics, rather than the personal ambition of the architect. This strategy mirrors the concepts of "critical regionalism" and "phenomenology of architecture» developed in the Western theory of architecture during the second part of the 20th century. The application of critical regionalism is based on the study of works by L. Lefaivre and A. Tzonis [3; 4], and K. Frampton [1]. Phenomenological approach is described through the works of C. Norberg-Schulz [6], J. Pallasmaa [7; 8], T. Thiis-Evensen [9], and P. Zumthor [12; 13].

Critical regionalism and the soul of architecture. Within the movement of critical re-

РАЗДЕЛ 3

НАЧИНАЮЩИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАТЕЛИ

gionalism, several representative and forward-looking scholars have based their views on the works L. Mumford, a famous American urban planning theorist of the 1930s–1960s who may be considered the earliest scholar to propose a regionalist approach. As early as in 1934 he celebrated the emergence of "picturesque regionalism", remarking that "the unique charm of the region has finally been accepted as beauty" [5, p. 17]. Gradually, however, the trend became the puppet of the capital, having turned from means of resistance to predatory capitalism into means of oppression. Therefore, Mumford redefined it, criticizing not only the uniform "international" modernism, but also the earliest forms of regionalism.

A. Tzonis and L. Lefaivre are the most influential theorists of critical regionalism developed in their prominent works: "Architecture of Regionalism in the Age of Globalization" [3] and "Critical regionalism: architecture and identity in a globalized world" [4]. The authors regard regionalism as a bottom-up design method and recognize the value of identity representation through material, social and cultural conditions. In his essay "Towards critical regionalism: six points against Architecture" [1] K. Frampton suggested that critical regionalism should adopt critical modern architecture because it is generally progressive, but at the same time its value should be based on the geographical environment of the building. Frampton believed the focus should be on topography, climate and light; in the form of architecture rather than perspective, it should be tactile rather than visual. Frampton referenced phenomenology of architecture in his argument. The core of this concept is a "critical" reinterpretation of local architectural types, local materials and the application of handicrafts in architecture. This is "another concept of place put forward in the broader global architectural context" [1, p. 16].

Therefore, we may conclude that the key features of critical regionalism are ad-hoc solutions, locally sourced materials, building techniques, construction methods and green "passive" technology (locally developed approaches to insulation, protection from the sun, types of brickwork, carpentry and so on).

The application of locally produced materials and "mknow hows" automatically embodies the local cultural identity. On the other hand, shapes, outlines and proportions of buildings can be contemporary. From an aesthetic standpoint, regional character is not in traditional décor or shape but in traditional construction, color and texture that arises from function and nature of the land and the lifestyle of the people. The resulting aesthetics are relevant and fresh and at the same time familiar and easy to relate with.

Many good examples of this approach to regionalism may be found in the architecture of Finland of the late 20th century. Finland has always maintained its local regional and cultural characteristics, even in the period when modernism and internationalism prevailed [11]. This is the case of Temppeliaukio Church located in Tampere Rock Square in downtown Helsinki. It was designed by T. S. Suomalainen and T. O. Suomalainen in 1969 (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Temppeliaukio Church by
T. S. Suomalainen and T. O. Suomalainen.
Photo Matthew Duncan

The design of the church fully respects the natural environment of the site. The square it is in is covered by a huge undulating rock, which is 8–13 meters higher than the surrounding street. The church uses the rock highland to cleverly dig into the lower part of the rock to form an internal church space. From the outside, it is still a huge rock formed naturally. From the inside, its inner wall is the original appearance of undecorated rock, and the top wall is made of broken rock, which seems loose and messy, but in fact, each stone is carefully selected. Water droplets seep out from the cracks in the rock and flow into the underground waterway along the rock wall,

enhancing the audio-visual effect in the church. At the top of the church, the dome-designed roof is supported by more than 100 radial copper grid beams and columns, and is inlaid with transparent glass, which solves the problem of natural lighting. The respectful use of nature is in line with the Finnish natural and simple aesthetic emotion.

The soul of architecture and the spirit of the place: parallels with the phenomenology of architecture. Architectural phenomenology is a philosophical method of architecture which emphasizes human experience, social background, ideological intention and historical reflection, as well as poetic and ethical thinking. The phenomenology of architecture was developed by C. Norberg-Schulz [6] based on the writings of M. Heidegger and M. Merleau-Ponty.

The concept of the "spirit of the place" introduced by C. Norberg-Schulz is the core of architectural phenomenology. Each place has its own unique inner spirit and characteristics, and the creative maintenance and continuation of the spirit of the place (also called "genius loci") is a fundamental purpose of phenomenology. He divided places into "natural" and "man-made". The perception of natural places includes people's perception of water, plants, geographical location, light, climate and other natural elements, while the perception of man-made places includes people's perceptual experience of spatial shape, cultural elements, architectural composition and so on. People perceive these elements through vision, touch, taste, smell and other senses, and create a place that can obtain the audience's "sense of identity" from these aspects. Unlike the more logical and easy-to-grasp technical approach of critical regionalism that relies on the understanding of local materials, environment, cultural and social context, phenomenology is a vague concept that relies on feeling. Phenomenology is based on the premise that the local identity and the very spirit of the place manifests as a complex phenomenon that combines a variety of irrational feelings and emotional reactions that arise from the multisensory experience of space and place that can neither be pinpointed nor reduced to the sum of its parts or the sum of the senses with which you experience them [6, p. 8].

This complex experience expands beyond the purely logical analysis of culture identity traits, building methods and materials, or the local environment.

In 1989s. Holl proposed his own method of manifesting the spirit of the place [2]. This method was called "anchoring" – the forging of various conceptual and empirical connections between the building and its site. Holl believed that these connections are a combination of an intellectual "limited concept" and an emotional or sensual "poetics of display", which is the essence of architectural works [2, p. 6].

From the practical standpoint, we can distinguish two approaches to phenomenology, existential phenomenology and perceptual phenomenology [10]. Both have become the philosophical guiding ideology of regionalist architecture. The most prominent researcher of perceptual phenomenology is Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. He focused on the real experiences of life, such as sound, temperature, smell, tactile and sensual perception, light, texture and other perceptual phenomena in architecture that create the unique atmosphere which constitutes our sense of place [12]. At the same time, he is also permeated with the expression of perceptual experience and details in architectural practice [13].

In addition to these architectural theorists and architects, there is a plethora of practitioners of architectural phenomenology all over the world. Among them are Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza, Japanese architects Kengo Kuma, Kazuyo Sejima and Hiroshi Nakamura, and Tadao Ando. Each of them abstains from a simple formal imitation of phenomenological architecture principles, but refines and externalizes an in-depth understanding of the spirit of the local culture. For example, Kengo Kuma, Toyo Ito and Kazuyo Sejima have incorporated intangible Japanese elements into their modern architecture, such as the lightness of Japanese architecture, the use of log materials, the embodiment of Zen, and so on.

Tadao Ando redefined sacred space as "space cut from nature" in his project of Church on the Water (1988, Hokkaido, Japan) (fig. 2). The designer exhibited the unique Japanese natural belief of symbiosis with nature.



Fig. 2. Church on the Water Tadao Ando.
Photo by Tadao Ando

The front of the church is completely open, and the feeling of nature, such as the movement of the sun and the moon, the fragrance of flowers, the sound of gurgling water, wind, frost, rain and snow, are intuitively and unreservedly conveyed to the viewer's five senses. The church from the plane to the facade is as strictly symmetrical as a cross, in line with the spirit of the church place. The building material mainly chooses fair-faced concrete, glass and indoor wooden furniture, to maintain the texture and state of the material itself, which is also very in line with the treatment of Japanese architecture. Because the building is located in the mountains and forests, the dark environment around the night forms a sharp contrast with the bright and soft lighting of the building, and the light plays a very strong guiding role, which guides the audience to approach the building step by step. To more deeply understand and speculate the spiritual feelings that architecture brings to people, guide people's emotional changes, and arouse people's imagination, Tadao Ando designed not only architecture, but also an "open way", a way to open buildings and open people's hearts. His architecture is not only contemporary, regional and cultural, but also instructive. It is not only material, but also spiritual.

Philosophical background of regional architecture in China. Compared with other countries, China's regional culture has great peculiarity. From the time axis, it has gone through thousands of years and dozens of ruling dynasties. In terms of space, the land area of China is very large, and in terms of longitude and latitude, the natural environment and

geographical environment of each region are obviously different. In terms of cultural factors, China is a multi-ethnic country, in addition to a common mainstream culture, each nation has its own sub-national culture. Thus, Chinese culture is huge and diverse, but it also has a philosophical thread in it. Chinese philosophy affects the way of life of Chinese people at all levels. It is a completely different system from that of the Western world. It is reserved and elusive. If we want to build a building with Chinese regional culture, we must first clarify the huge system of Chinese cultural elements and truly understand the essence of the spirit of Chinese culture.

The fundamental spirit of Chinese culture is the humanistic spirit of the Chinese people. The concept of "humanities" is the core concept in Chinese culture. In the original wording from the Book of changes (I Ching) it is interconnected with "astronomy". The specific meaning can be translated as: "through the observation of astronomy, to understand the changes of the four seasons throughout the year, and through the understanding and respect for nature, to form a kind of customs and customs of human society in accordance with the laws of nature. So as to guide the social life of the world after one must form a unique humanistic culture, and then educate people through this culture, so that all people can form a good social custom under this concept". In fact, the well-known Chinese culture of "Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism" was formed in this philosophical logic. The I Ching is the origin of Chinese culture; both Taoist culture and Confucian culture are derived from the I Ching.

The reason why the I Ching is the common source of Confucianism and Taoism is that Confucianism has gradually developed into the law of human code of conduct and the system of etiquette and law through the natural laws revealed by it. On the other hand, Taoism explores more objective laws hidden behind human beings, or phenomena, which is metaphysical, so many scholars also think that Laozi, the representative of Taoism, is a philosopher, while his work Tao Te Ching is a philosophical work. Thus, Taoism reveals internal laws and Confucian external norms,

but their sources all come from the I Ching, the foundation of Chinese philosophy.

Chinese philosophy tells people about the major characteristics of Chinese cultural spirit:

- the natural view of the unity of man and nature;
- the view of the ever-changing Universe;
- religious pluralism;
- aesthetics of Life in time and space.

Chinese Taoist culture has always pursued the realm of "unity of man and nature", believing that the place where people live must be full of vitality and a sense of time and space. So, when the ancients-built houses, they would introduce the natural environment into them. The Chinese people's expression of nature is an imitation of the laws of nature and the artistic conception of nature – of a place that is "natural and uncarved". Chinese people's view of nature is "lyric", "smooth", "relaxed", "combed and dense", "like a picture", because Chinese people advocate nature. Westerners' view of nature is "rational", "rigorous", "normative", and "carved" that arises from the belief that man is great and can change nature. The Japanese view of nature is different from China in that while advocating nature, they embody their personality characteristics – delicate, exquisite, and slightly reserved. Different views of nature impact on architecture, and the architectural images formed have different characteristics and reflect different "architectural souls".

Those founding principles of the Chinese collective conscious are embodied in The Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Fine Arts (fig. 3) designed by Wang Shu, the dean of the School of Architecture of the China Academy of Fine Arts and 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize winner. With his architectural concept based on local environment and architectural techniques that integrate many traditional Chinese architectural elements, Wang Shu has made a strong contribution to the popularity of contemporary Chinese architecture in the world. He once said, "the main purpose of the Xiangshan campus is to do an experiment on modern architecture with local Chinese characteristics, inspired by the concept of traditional Chinese landscape painting and dialogue with nature" [10]. Wang Shu used

brick, stone, rammed earth, cement plaster, wood, steel structure and other building materials in Xiangshan campus. In the selection and application of building materials, Wang Shu uses many recycled materials, such as the tile wall. This kind of local building materials sourced from the people in eastern Zhejiang are fully integrated into the building, coruscating a new vitality. They come from more than 30 traditional villages that have been demolished. These more than 7 million pieces of waste bricks and tiles of different ages not only effectively reduce the construction funds, but also fully explore the reusability of local building materials; it also makes the building in the appearance of a simple, heavy emotional significance, increasing the timeliness and historicity of the design.



Fig. 3. Xiangshan Campus of the China Academy of Fine Arts by Wang Shu. Photo Iwan Baan

The strategy of "modern architecture with soul" with Chinese characteristics. The soul of Chinese architecture is embodied in the expression of Chinese cultural spirit in Chinese architecture. If we want to accurately express the spirit of Chinese culture in architecture, we must understand the connotation and thinking logic of Chinese culture, as well as the emotional factors behind the culture. It is necessary to grasp the core of Chinese culture, not the literal meaning expressed by language. The first thing to pay attention to in understanding Chinese culture is that Chinese language, especially ancient prose, is more of a metaphor than a literal meaning. Secondly, in Chinese culture, due to the special national conditions, multi-ethnicity, regionality and long history, Chinese culture includes not only Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, but also sub-regional cultural and historical and cultural factors. If

we want to express the "Chinese soul" of architecture more clearly and appropriately, we must pay attention to the multiple factors of Chinese culture, extract and integrate the connotation of "time factor", "space (regional and natural) factor" and "philosophy and aesthetics factor" into architecture.

If the Chinese culture is the "spirit" of Chinese architecture, then the various material forms of architecture are its "skeleton". Only with the perfect combination of "skeleton" and "soul" can we build a fresh and vital building. The "skeleton" includes the material, the structure, the color of the building, spatial organization and so on. These specific material forms can be analyzed and used reasonably by studying the characteristics of these figurative materials. These material forms can show an accurate spirit of place, encourage intuitive perception and emotional resonance. This step can also be called spiritual externalization.

If we draw lessons from the specific methods of Western architectural phenomenology and critical regionalism, deeply and accurately understand the spirit of the Chinese culture, and accurately express it through various material forms, then architecture consequentially will manifest its "soul". But this alone is not enough. In a constantly developing society, where the environment is changing, the material conditions of life are also in constant motion. Therefore, architectural design should also keep pace with the times, be contemporary and relevant. To achieve this, new materials, structures and technologies with local characteristics should be in use. To combat ecological problems, we can innovate new forms of more environmentally friendly and sustainable development. This aesthetic and ecological relevance can also be regarded as the "flesh and blood" of architecture.

Conclusion. A strategy of "Modern architecture with soul: a contemporary approach to regional culture" is devised to combat the uniformity, spectacularism and disregard of local cultural context in Chinese architecture of the 1999s–2010s. The "soul" of architecture is embodied in regional and local cultural identities based on history, tradition, and customs. This strategy mirrors the Western concepts of "critical regionalism" and "phenomenology

of architecture" and reflects the unique traits of Chinese philosophy that forms an integral part of Chinese identity. The major characteristics of Chinese cultural spirit are:

- the natural view of the unity of man and nature;
- the view of the ever-changing Universe;
- religious pluralism;
- aesthetics of Life in time and space.

The strategy of "modern architecture with soul" with Chinese characteristics is based on three principles: the diverse Chinese culture as the "spirit", the various material forms of architecture are its "skeleton", contemporaneity, relevance, and environmentalism as the "flesh and blood" of architecture. The three strategies together will grant Chinese architecture vitality and unique personal character.

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**СОВРЕМЕННАЯ АРХИТЕКТУРА
С «ДУШОЙ»: НОВЕЙШИЙ ПОДХОД К
РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ КУЛЬТУРЕ КИТАЯ**

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Цель статьи – разработать концепцию «одушевленной» китайской архитектуры, которая может стать новейшей стратегией выражения региональной культуры Китая в архитектуре. Основываясь на положениях критического регионализма и феноменологии архитектуры, автор формулирует свою собственную стратегию «современной одушевленной архитектуры». «Одушевленная архитектура»

отражает особенности китайской культурной идентичности, которая характеризуется культурным разнообразием, регионализмом и следованием принципам традиционной китайской философии. Стратегия «современной одушевленной архитектуры» основывается на трех принципах: китайской культуре как «душе»; материальной архитектуре как «скелете», соответствии духу времени и экологичности как «теле и крови» архитектуры. Следование этим принципам подразумевает актуализацию региональных культур Китая и разработку новых способов научно-обоснованного, здорового и устойчивого развития новейшей архитектуры в контексте ускоряющейся культурной ассимиляции и ускоренного развития архитектуры в глобализованном мире.

Ключевые слова: душа архитектуры, дух места, критический регионализм, феноменология архитектуры, новейшая архитектура, регионалистский подход в архитектуре.

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