Lewis Mumford Tropicalist

LIANE LEFAIVRE
Technical University of Delft

Lewis Mumford is not usually thought of as a Tropicalist. But one of the two writings in which he formulated his highly original Critical Regionalist paradigm most clearly and concretely is a book that deals with tropical architecture and the city. The book in question is *Report on Honolulu* (written 1938, published 1945), the result of a report he wrote up as a planner in Hawai – the only commission he accepted to work on as a practicing planner in his career.[2] The other is a book that deals with a theme inseparable from that of Tropicalism, and that is the south. The book, tellingly, is entitled *The South in Architecture* (1941).[3]

Although he wrote more on tropical and southern regions than on the Bay Region, it is the Bay Region and the Bay Region Style architects like William Wurster that Mumford is more readily associated with.[4] There is something typical about this oversight. The North has traditionally ignored the South. Interestingly, both of Mumford books were written during the first effort to counter this indifference, during the Roosevelt Era, when the Tennessee Valley Authority was set up to modernize the impoverished southern states. At the same time, the Roosevelt administration sent experts to Puerto Rico. Richard Neutra was hired by the Federal government to consult on the development of Puerto Rico, eventually leading to the publication of his book called *The Architecture of Social Concern*.[5]

The North's current indifference towards the tropical Mumford, like its indifference towards other important architects and urbanists – Tai Kheng Soon, Minnette de Silva, Lian Bo Bardi, Affonso Reidy, Mike Pearce, Otto Koenigsberger, Oluwole Olumuyiwa – is part of a much broader phenomenon when looked at globally. This is an indifference that comes with colonialism. Indeed, it is a remarkable fact that the tropical zone brings together countries that bear the similar burden of colonialism by the North.[6]

It is in *The South in Architecture*, that Mumford broke with one of the mainstays of the regionalist tradition: historicism. Although he did advocate the preservation of actual historical buildings built in the "vernacular Brick tradition" of the South because it "deserves to be regarded with a far more appreciative eye than people usually apply to it,"[7] he balked at the idea of mimicking them in new buildings. "Let us be clear about this," he wrote. "The forms that people used in other civilizations or in other periods of our own country's history were intimately part of the whole structure of their life. There is no method of mechanically reproducing these forms or bringing them back to life: it is a piece of rank materialism to attempt to duplicate some earlier form, because of its delight for the eye, without realizing how empty a form is without the life that once supported it. There is no such thing as a modern colonial house any more than there is such a thing as a modern Tudor house."[8] This attitude, equating the historicist and kitsch is still novel and surprising today. There are books announcing the demise of the search for regional "authenticity," indicating that it is still an issue.[9] Such a proposition would have been shocking in 1941. His strongest worded statement is the following: "If one seeks to reproduce such a building in our own day, every mark on it will betray the fact that it is fake, and the harder the architect works to conceal that that fact, the more patent the fact will be... The great lesson of history – and this applies to all the arts – is that the past cannot be recaptured except in spirit. We cannot live another person's life: we cannot, except in the spirit of a costume ball . . ."[10] Accordingly, he wrote, "Our task is not to imitate the past, but to understand it, so that we may face the opportunity of our own day and deal with them in an equally creative spirit."[11]

With Mumford's rejection of historicism as the architectural equivalent of a masked ball was his rejection of local materials when they were not adapted to the function of the building. "Regionalism is not a matter of using the most available local material, or of copying some simple form of construction that our ancestors used, for want of anything better, a century or two ago."[12] In fact he was for the total abandonment of historicist precedents is they were not adapted to the evolving needs of the region. "People often talk about regional characters as if they were the same thing as the aboriginal characters: the regional is identified with the rough, the primitive, the purely local. That is

a serious mistake. Since the adaptation of a culture to a particular environment is a long, complicated process, a full-blown regional character is the last to emerge. "We are only beginning to know enough about ourselves and about our environment to create a regional architecture."[13]

The reason Mumford disapproved of Jefferson was because he had made the "mistake" of using the local schist for his capitals at the University of Virginia just because it was a local stone. As it was brittle, there was much damage to the ornaments carried out in it. Mumford praised instead Richardson because he was much more interested in adapting the local to new building techniques, new materials. In this he was a rigorist or a functionalist, like Greenhough, thinking Jefferson was overly indulgent in decoration. He was more inclined to Richardson's more functionalist, radically anti-decorative, rigorist, functional design that made references to local traditions through a process we have elsewhere called "strangemaking."[14]

As far as the Return to Nature goes, another keystone of regionalism, Mumford also broke with the past. He rejected picturesqueness, in the sense of the purely aesthetic or spiritual enjoyment of landscape for its own sake."[15] For him "regional" meant something besides "a place for the personal touch, for the cherished accident," although it must be stressed that he did love the land in these terms. This is only natural. His roots stretched back to Rousseau's love of nature. Mumford wrote that "there was in the romantic movement from its beginning in Rousseau, an element of energy and vitality that could not be denied: the belief in nature, as a resource of the human spirit." For him attachment to the land was more than just a form of pastoral nostalgia or bucolic sentimentality. He was for redefining the meaning of the adapting the landscape in order to deal with the new realities. "Regional forms," he believed, "are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which fully succeed in making a people feel at home in their environment: they do not merely utilize the soil but they reflect the current conditions of culture in the region."[16] This is what made him a disciple of the Garden City movement, and of the regional planning of Patrick Geddes who saw garden city not just as a technique for designing green residential areas but as policy guiding economic and social planning based on decentralized neighboorhood planning.[17] But, in the end, questions of regional planning are subsumed in Mumford's thinking within the larger questions of what has come since to be called ecology and sustainability, what he himself referred to in *Technics and Civilization* of 1938 as the "biotechnic" age that he believed was the next order , following the present neotechnic order, "over the edge of the horizon."[18] Among the aims of biotechnic regionalism were the restoration of the balance between man and nature, the conservation and restoration of soils, of the forest cover to provide shelter for wildlife.[19]

Wither Honolulu is where his the ecological or sustainable aspect that Mumford dealt with only theoretically in *Tecnics and Civilization*. The text contains his master plan, which was the first tropical city planned along the lines of a garden city. Accordingly, Mumford saw Honolulu as a "great park," accordingly, made up of "tropic foliage, with the pepper red of the Poinciana, the brilliant yellow of the golden shower, the feathery greens of the palms, the dark tones of the banyan trees."[20] He suggested widening and planting the major thoroughfare, Bishop Street, the provision of a parking area and the wiping away of the collection of miscellaneous buildings marring the view of the mountains. But he was also critical of the fact the present parks were restricted to "recreation zones,"[21] and proposed that they be used in a more integrated way in urban life, first as a potential cooling device capable of "renewing the air, tempering the heat if the sun, reducing glare and strain, providing visual delight for play and relaxation and supplying one of the most sanative of all modes of work – the care of plants itself."[22] As an extension of the garden city idea and regional planning idea, he also suggested the provision of greenbelts or park girdles, as little as a hundred feet wide, which could give as much coherence to a modern neighborhood superblocks "as a the ancient wall used to for the medieval city."[23] "The spurs of the mountains that lead into the city form natural open areas that can only be developed for urban building at an extravagant cost. Where these areas have not been sacrificed to the subdivider, they should be retained and connected together as a greenbelt," he specified.

On the other hand, for all his ecological concerns, he was also for the use of the most advanced technology of the day. Again, this was not in line with traditional regionalists. As is evident from his Honolulu Report, he was for the air conditioner. Although scientific research had shown that the lowering of temperature was not so important as the direct air in cooling the body, still Mumford allowed that "mechanical air conditioning might be a useful auxiliary to nature under special conditions" such as the work place, preceding Singapore's founding premier Lee Kuan Yew famous statement that the air conditioner was the best invention of the twentieth century.[24] But in most circumstances of living, natural modes of air conditions through ventilation is best.[25] Thirty years before Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design of the First Machine Age* (1960), in Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* of 1934 we have a celebration of technical inventions such as the modern steamship. He had great admiration for Buckminster Fuller's streamline Dymaxion car, the Union Pacific train, and the Soviet "Rail Zeppelin spherotrain," Brooklyn Bridge and the Galerie des Machines in Paris. Finally, he admired Neutra's image of the modern city put forth in his largely forgotten *Rush City Reformed* scheme published in his early *Wie baut Amerika* of 1927, where the emphasis was placed on movement, with ubiquitous freeways, local and express elevated train systems, railroads, airports all interlinked.[26] An interesting feature were landing strips for helicopters at the railway station and on the

roofs of elevated stations. Mumford wrote in 1949 that that "kind of thinking should now be resumed and perhaps public competitions should be held to enlist the imagination of the younger generation of architects and planners . . ."[27]

Surely the most radically new departure of Mumford's regionalism lay in his definition of "community." First, as an heir to the Whitman and to the Transcendentalist movement, he could not abide the traditional regionalist idea of community as monocultural, based on tribal associations, blood ties and an attachment a soil that was purely native. Mumford espoused the view that community could be something multicultural.[28] Second, as a follower of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, the first philosopher in Germany to propose an alternative to the "Blood and Soil" theory of community that had dominated German thought since the theme of Gemeinschaft versus Gesellshaft had been introduced by Simmel. Mumford's *South in Architecture* makes the point most forcefully. Here his definition of regionalism was consciously opposed to Heidegger's.[29] His *Report on Honolulu* is where he first put forth this view. He described that city as a multi-cultural city, made up of original Polynesians, Japanese and Chinese, and various *Haole* groups (western) which makes it "a significant experiment in the hybridization of cultures which perhaps will mark the future development of human society: it is a miniature experimental station."[30]

5) Finally, Mumford did not see an opposition between the what he called the "local" and the "universal," between what we would call today the "regional" versus the "global." He saw regionalism not as a way of resisting globalization, or rather, not completely. Mumford struck a balance between regionalism and globalism. Again, it is *in The South in Architecture* that he introduced the notion, in these terms: "The philosophic problem of the general and the particular has its counterpart in architecture; and during the last century that problem has shaped itself more and more into the question of what weight should be given to the universal imprint of the machine and the local imprint of the region and the community." This was another way of saying that "every regional culture necessarily has a universal side to it. It is steadily open to influences that come from other parts of the world, and from other cultures, separated from the local region in space or time or both together. It would be useful if we formed the habit of never using the world regional without mentally adding to it the idea of universal – remembering the constant contact and interchange between local scene and the wide world that lies beyond it. To make the best use of local resources, we must often seek help from *people* or *ideas* or technical methods that originate elsewhere. . . . As with a human being, every culture must both be itself and transcend itself; it must make most of its limitations and must pass beyond them; it must be open to fresh experience and yet it must maintain its integrity. In no other art is that process more sharply focused than in architecture."[31]

The originality of this last position cannot be overestimated. For the first time a regionalist steered a middle course between the particular and the universal, and that there was nothing mutually exclusive between one region and another, or between one region and the globe, that there was the possibility of mutually beneficial negotiating to be carried out within a wider, in principle collaborative so to speak, scheme of things. This marked a major swing away from a centuries-old mental pattern of regionalist thinking based on an adversarial stance – against an authoritarian imperialist domination – to one based on what one might call, borrowing the term from one of Mumford's most admired philosophers Martin Buber, "inbetweening."

CONCLUSION

Half a century has passed since Mumford put forth his regionalist paradigm in relation to the tropics. Though ignored for so long, it – embracing issues of memory, sustainability, technology and community as it does – just gets more relevant all the time.

NOTES

[1] This text is based in large part on Alex Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre and Bruno Stagno, *Tropical Architecture. Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalization*, London, Wiley, 2001.

[2] Lewis Mumford, "Report on Honolulu" in *City Development* (New York, 1945)

[3] Lewis Mumford, *The South in Architecture* (New York, 1941)

[4] Among writings that have concentrated on Mumford are the writings on critical regionalism by myself and Alex Tzonis. In fact Mumford only mentions the Bay Region Style briefly in an article in *The New Yorker*, October 11, 1947 and in another article. See our "Lewis Mumford's Regionalism," *Design Book Review*, 19, Winter 1991, pp. 20-25.

[5] Richard Neutra, *The Architecture of Social Concern* (Sao Paolo, 1948). Although published after the war, he book is based on Roosevelt Era work in Puerto Rico.

[6] The postcolonial condition that characterizes the entire tropical belt is touched on in Alex Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre and Bruno Stagno (eds) *Tropical Architecture: Critical Regionalism in an Age of Globalization* (London, 2000)

[7] Lewis Mumford, *The South in Architecture*, New York, 1941, p. 13.

[8] Ibid. p. 14

[9] See Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley, 1998).

[10] *The South in Architecture*, pp. 15-16

[11] Ibid. p.18

[12] p. 30

[13] p. 30

[14] Tzonis and Lefaivre, "Critical Regionalism," in A. Graafland, *The Critical Landscape* (Rotterdam, 1996), pp. 35-47.

[15] p. 32

[16] P.30

[17] The book that impressed him here was Patrick Geddes, *City Development: a Study of Parks, Gardens and Culture Institutes* published in 1904.

[18] Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1938, p. 353.

[19] Ibid. p. 431-433.

[20] p.77

[21] p. 95

[22] pp. 89-90

[23] p. 98

[24] See the article of Philip Bay "Three Tropical Design Paradigms" in Tzonis, Lefaivre and Stagno (eds), pp. 229-265. p. 259.for the reference to this statement of Lee Kuan Yu. published in the *Straights Times*, Singapore, Jan. 19, 1999, p. 1.

[25] p.95

[26] Richard Neutra, *Wie baut Amerika?* Stuttgart, Hoffmann, 1927.

[27] See Mumford's *New Yorker* article of January 8, 1949, p. 60.

[28] See F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, London, Oxford University Press, 1941, and David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance. The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

[29] See Alexander Tznis and Liane Lefaivre, "Lewis Mumford's Regionalism." *Design Book Review*, 19, winter 1991, p. 20-25.

[30] P. 90.

[31] P. 32