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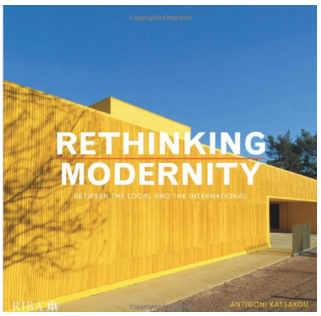
BOOK REVIEW: ANTIGONI KATSAKOU RETHINKING MODERNITY. BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE INTERNATIONAL *RIBA PUBLISHING, 2020*

REVIEWER: NINA BERRE, PROFESSOR AT THE INSTITUTE OF FORM, THEORY AND HISTORY, AHO



Global modernization and regional cultures

In the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, the curators of the national pavilions were encouraged by the biennale director Rem Koolhaas to explore key moments from a century of modernization in their respective country. The intension of "Absorbing modernity 1914–2014" was to collect and display histories from a century of modernity, and the ways in which the transfer of international ideas were translated and absorbed in the architecture of the respective countries.

Antigoni Katsakou's story of modern houses in Europe and Latin America, contextualized by a discussion on the British situation in the interwar years, seems to stem from a similar perspective. The sympathetically light-weight, softcover, 20 x 20 cm book of 186 pages documents a series of famous buildings alongside more hidden gems, and is organized in seven chapters, with an introduction and afterword by the author, and a foreword by Antonio Millan-Gomez, professor of architectural representation at BarcelonaTech (UPC).

In her introduction, Katsakou explains how her work builds on the numerous alternative studies of interwar architecture, when scholars started to highlight and discuss architectural projects that were not part of, or identified as, European or American avant-garde. Her intention of discussing the alternatives is legitimized by an assumption that certain interesting historical buildings have remained "largely unexplored" because their relation to local historical contexts has excluded them from earlier studies and discourses. Besides the idea of documenting such hitherto unknown works – which is a good idea in itself – Katsakou's intention to demonstrate architectural continuity throughout the 20th century is promising. However, one can question whether this is in opposition to most historians for whom "modernity coincides with a rupture with past traditions and styles", as she states (p. xvi). Nevertheless, it indeed makes sense when she situates her selection of medium-sized buildings, often single-family houses from well-known architects, alongside the lesser-known ones from around 1900–1960. The examples are consequently discussed in the context of more recent architecture, although this concept is not followed systematically throughout the book, as for example in chapter 2. That chapter (as well as chapter 3) discusses buildings realized in Norway, a selection this reader is most familiar with, and to which I would like to return. However, let me begin with chapter 1, entitled "Tradition and Identity".

Gio Ponti's unbuilt project *Pompeiian-style Villa* from 1934 forms the introductory case of the first chapter. This seems to be a good choice, given Ponti's priority of the traditional lifestyle rather than of the geometric abstract shapes and colours of Mediterranean architecture. Ponti's early architectural interests are well illustrated in the presented plan and a colour perspective of the house, depicting a traditional home organized around an atrium. Turning towards more liberal, realized interpretations of international ideas in Italy, Greece and Mexico around 1900–1930, the chapter concludes by viewing the examples in the light of contemporary architecture. Dimitris Pikionis' *Rodakis House* (Aegina, 1912) and Luis Barragán's *Gonzalez Luna House* (Guadalajara, 1929) are for example discussed in the same trajectory of values and concerns found in works by Tadao Ando, Peter Zumthor and Steven Holl. Timelessness, craftmanship, attention to detailing, experience and light are values that resonate well with the notion of tradition and identity. However, there is quite a long distance from Gio Ponti's un-built 1934 house to works by Peter Zumthor, and this raises a question about the selected buildings, organized under the chapter's different titles and themes. Ordering the stories of this book thematically rather than chronologically, and certainly not by era, seems to be the most sensible way. But this first chapter makes me nevertheless wonder how the early modernist, interwar and post-war buildings described here respond to the themes and topics presented in the next chapters, and vice versa.

In chapter 2, "Modernity and Context", Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House* (1945–51) and other icons by Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright are discussed alongside buildings realized in Poland, Argentina and Norway. The "Norwegian section" comprises a pre-war villa by the "functionalist" Ove Bang (*Villa Stousland*, Oslo, 1935), together with the modest post-war homes and cottages of Knut Knutsen (*Summer Cottage*, Portør, 1949) and Wenche Selmer (*Own House*, Oslo, 1963, and *Summer House*, Hellersøya, 1965), examples which might be interpreted as not well-known, nevertheless published internationally, as Katsakou herself notes.[1] Bang's villa indeed illustrates the transfer of international ideals and the Norwegian context in the 1930s. In many cases, the concepts of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were almost applied to a hilly Norwegian landscape, even though the Norwegian architects never applied Le Corbusier's doctrine by detaching the houses entirely from the ground with the use of pilotis.[2]

Bang is known as one of the rather many pre-war architects in Norway who were much concerned with the new international ideas, and who successfully transferred and interpreted the international concrete, abstracted volumes into the so-called "timber Modernism", typical of Norwegian pre-war, single-family, housing architecture. After the war, architects were even more concerned with local values and building traditions, with an emphasis on on-site conditions. Knut Knutsen and Wenche Selmer are definitely relevant representatives of something Knutsen would later call "a human architecture, liberated from types of style", as a contrast to the contemporaneous obsession with high technology. Consequently, Katsakou concludes the chapter by discussing how her examples are modelled into the landscape, their close relation to place and to a certain imbedded unpretentiousness, all strands that can be seen as negotiation tools between modernity and context.

Not as convincing is the bridge Katsakou builds between Knutsen's approach to construction and to Sverre Fehn's 1962 Nordic pavilion for the Venice Biennale. The only work by Knutsen in Katsakou's book is the small summer cottage of 1949. Another connection, in line with the other chapters in the book, would be to discuss Knutsen's "unpretentiousness" in the light of current discussions in contemporary architecture. Knutsen's original pencil drawing of his summer house, which Katsakou thankfully publishes in her book, has achieved virtually iconic status in the Norwegian historiography, and comprises something of a manifesto of Knutsen's ideas about architecture from around 1940 onwards. As a counter to the universal and industrial nature of Modernism, Knutsen sought to use the world's resources economically, and to allow his buildings to exist in harmony with nature. These ideas – the importance of an architecture anchored in the region, the use of local building traditions and, not least, the modesty of resources resonate very well with today's discourse, the need for an ecological and circular development of the

1 For example, Bang's Villa Stousland and Knutsen's Summer House are presented in Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Modern Norwegian Architecture* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1986), while Wenche Selmer's works are well-documented not only in Elisabeth Tostrup's article of 2000, referred to by Katsakou, but also in Tostrup's more recent monography *Norwegian Wood: The Thoughtful Architecture of Wenche Selmer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).

2 As Tim Benton points out in "Arne Korsmo: The Villa Stenersen", in *as-Built Classic*, vol. 21, ed. Mari Lending and Nina Berre (Oslo: Pax, 2019).

economy, and with current architectural examples and unbuilt visions, but these are not included in Katsakou's narrative.

The next three chapters are structured by the headings "Material and Colors", "The Forbidden Wor(l)d: Ornament and Decoration in the Alternative Modern" and "Geometry and Spatial Experience". Here we meet some of the aforementioned architects, in addition to others whose projects were realized in the United States, Latin America and Europe. Despite the numerous buildings and architects discussed in texts and images throughout the book – around 80 architects are personified in a timeline at the end – the question of selection returns. For example, in the chapter on materials and colour, which includes Barragan's locally rooted interpretations, Le Corbusier's 1930 colour keyboard and Arne Korsmo's vivid colour combinations exemplified in Villa Stenersen (Oslo, 1937–1939), other worthwhile and lesser known representatives than Villa Stenersen would have been found in Oslo or in the Nordic Countries.

Pinpointing missing projects and references is a rather unfair practice, since a 186-page book in no way intends to be encyclopaedic, and because buildings certainly can be internationally un-known, and national icons at the same time. But because Katsakou has already visited the architectural culture in pre- and post-war Norway, it is hard to avoid thinking of other, and perhaps better, examples to underscore her arguments. To the chapter of ornament, decoration and geometry, Arnstein Arneberg's richly odd interiors for the Security Council Chamber, located in the UN Building in New York, could for example have been a match alongside the selected works by Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, the two modernist heroes responsible for the design of the UN Building.

The final two chapters, closely linked with Continental Europe, and entitled "The Modern Diaspora: Latin America" (co-written with Iliana Miranda-Zacarias) and "Modern Diaspora and the British Interwar Period", are probably the strongest features in the book, highlighting connections between modern architecture across continents and cultures. The chapter about Latin America is beautifully structured by three main avenues of transfer: the visits from European architects; the architects originating from Latin America who studied in Europe before returning home to practise; and lastly, the emigration of Jewish and/or radical architects in the wake of fascist regimes in Europe in the 1930s. Here, the interesting Brazilian "alternative" modernism occurs, with irregular forms, open and semi-open spaces and a visible, national identity. Also, the chapter on the British diaspora – which concludes that these architects before they moved, mainly to the US, sped up the modernist process in Great Britain – provides a clear understanding of the struggle against modernism in that country. Other strengths of this chapter are the well-explained Housing Act of 1919 and the strong British traditions in the Arts & Crafts movement.

Indeed, Antigoni Katsakou´s intention of seeking new continuities, partly by exploring the hidden, alternative-modern across Europe, the US and Latin America is certainly not a simple matter. The list of "unexplored" (female) architects is evidently long, and Katsakou's sources for identifying the lesser-known projects seem to mainly stem from published articles and books. One cannot demand archival studies of field works for writing a new book, but the potential for new findings and establishing alternative connections could by such methods have been further exploited. A bibliography in addition to the endnotes would in any case have been useful.

Katsakou does argue well in her conclusion that her examples constitute "an unfailing source of study for scholars focusing on modernity and its ramifications for contemporary architecture" (p. 168), putting yet another layer to the story. This adds a sequence concerning the situation in Asia and Africa, including the impact of the Architectural Association's Department of Tropical Architecture, founded in 1954. The story would at least deserve a footnote or two, given the field's increasing array of research sources.

However, the promise in Antonio Millan-Gomez's foreword seems to be achieved: this is not a revision or new definition of modernity in architecture, but a reminder of the inseparable connection between tradition and identity. Indeed, the book's great effort of localizing modernism builds on, and adds new layers, to Kenneth Frampton's "critical regionalism". Katsakou makes clear early on that, for example, Pikionis and Barragan are classified as "critical regionalists" in Frampton's book *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (first published in 1980). However, and as far as I can see, Katsakou's selection of buildings from these two architects plays no role in the referred publication by Frampton. At her best, Katsakou identifies and discusses multi-layered histories with a capacity to approach something close to those "schools" that Frampton here was preoccupied with:

> *The term "Critical Regionalism" is not intended to denote the vernacular as this was once spontaneously produced by combined interaction of climate, culture, myth and craft, but rather to identify those recent regional "schools" whose primary aim has been to reflect and serve the limited constituencies in which they are grounded.*[3]

Katsakou thereby steps right into today's meaningful interest in the hitherto little-known histories. The rich architecture designed by local architects in the interwar and postwar period, as part of universal political thoughts, technological developments, societal challenges and the transfer of architectural ideals, and still representing historical continuity and local anchoring, is a fruitful lens to view modern architecture through.

3 Kenneth Frampton, "Critical Regionalism: Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity", chapter 5 in *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. 4th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

In her afterword, Katsakou remarks in addition on the possibilities contemporary architects may see in their creational work, if the theory and history of architecture could play more than an accessory role in the design process. This is a good point, and substantiates her fine tone of voice throughout the book. Seen in the context of practising architects as a target group for the book, the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale might again be relevant. One could, for example, have wished for more graphical material than the single timeline we find in the book, inspired by the numerous exhibitions documenting splintering modernities in Venice; such as geographical maps, matrixes or other visual materials, in order to better understand the relationship between the global circulation of ideas and local interpretations.