

CRITICAL REGIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

SYNOPSIS

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by

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1. Introduction

The universal ideas and principles of modernist architecture have often been employed uncritically without consideration of regional peculiarities, leading to culturally and climatically inappropriate architecture which is unable to engage its occupants in a meaningful manner. As a consequence, many considerate architects have started combining ideas and principles of traditional architecture with the progressive ideas of modernisation to conceive architecture that tackles region-specific issues like climate-responsiveness and sociocultural appropriateness of built-forms.



Figure 1: Left: Saynatsalo Town Hall, Finland (1952) by Alvar Aalto (Photo: Peter Shep); Right: Bagsvaerd Church, Copenhagen (1976) by Jørn Utzon (Photo: Sarah Eddy)

Architecture in the latter half of the twentieth-century witnessed a continuing endeavour to reconcile modernity and tradition. The term ‘critical regionalism’ has been used to describe the architectural approach that distils the underlying principles of traditional architecture and blends them with the latest construction technologies to create architecture that truly represents our time. Even though the term ‘critical regionalism’ was coined in the 1980s, its ideas have been pursued around the world since the 1950s in the work of architects like Alvar Aalto (Finland), Jørn Utzon (Denmark) and Luis Barragán (Mexico) (Figure 1).

In India, as early as the 1960s, architects like Charles Correa and Joseph Allen Stein had begun pursuing the ideas of critical regionalism by situating their built-forms within the context of the locale. Thereafter, architects like Balkrishna Doshi, Raj Rewal, Hasmukh Patel and Uttam Jain started incorporating the ideas of critical regionalism in their designs to counter the homogenisation of architecture brought by modernism. By the 1980s, architectural regionalism in

India reached its peak as buildings fulfilling a wide variety of programmes embodied a reaction to local culture, technology and climate.



Figure 2: The Yellow Train School, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu (2013) by Chitra Vishwanath (Photo: Vivek Muthuramalingam)

However, with the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s, global capital transplanted the ubiquitous air-conditioned curtain glass building to India. Eventually though, the inappropriateness of the glass curtain wall to the climate and culture of India engendered a strong reaction among certain Indian architects, reviving their interest in critical regionalism. Architects like Shirish Beri, Ashok B Lall, Sanjay Mohe and Chitra Vishwanath have carried forward the ideas of critical regionalism to the twenty-first century (Figure 2). Lately, more and more architectural practices have emerged in India that relate their designs to the deeper sensibilities and tangible realities of the place.

2. The Research Context

This thesis is an inquiry into the development and practice of critical regionalism in India. The research is motivated by a conscious realisation of the absence of adequate theoretical bases for a regional architecture in India. As increasing globalisation is resulting in systematic erosion of difference and plurality, the integration of indigenous wisdom with contemporary architecture has assumed a renewed and timely importance. Relying on interviews, site visits and analysis of selected writings and architectural works, the study elucidates key concepts, techniques and qualities of critical regionalism as practiced in India.

In the aforementioned context this research inquiry is oriented to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the assessment criteria to identify critical regionalist project?
- (2) How has critical regionalism progressed in India over the years?
- (3) What are the intricacies of practicing critical regionalism in India?
- (4) In what ways can the ideas and principles of critical regionalism be incorporated in an architectural work?

The research is aimed at developing a comprehensive understanding of the practice of critical regionalism in contemporary Indian architecture. The objectives identified for fulfilment of this aim are as follows:

- (1) **To determine** the key attributes of a critical regionalist work so as to identify and assess architectural works that integrate regional values.
- (2) **To trace** the development of critical regionalism in Indian architecture.
- (3) **To gain** in-depth understanding of the strategies, mechanisms and tools employed by regionalist architects practicing in India.
- (4) **To understand** how the principles of critical regionalism are integrated in architectural works.

3. Critical Regionalism in Architectural Theory and Practice

The research begins with a review of scholarship to extract the ideas and principles of critical regionalism as expressed by different architectural critics and theorists. Study of scholarly literature on critical regionalism helps in comprehending the definition of critical regionalism, its significance in contemporary times, and its origins and development in history. The literature study also helps distinguishing critical regionalism from other architectural movements such as neo-vernacularism, postmodernism and sustainable architecture. Crucially, the literature study reveals seven key attributes vital for

a critical regionalist work: urban sensitivity, historical knowledge, climate responsiveness, ecological sensitiveness, use of local materials and construction techniques, technological sustainability, and cultural appropriateness.

4. Historical Account of Critical Regionalism in India

Relying on the seven key attributes of critical regionalism determined through the literature study, the study is able to identify a hundred-odd architectural works of significance realised in India that integrate the ideas of critical regionalism in their designs. The identified regionalist projects were categorised according to their building programmes and significant examples in each building type have been discussed, bringing forth their qualities that make them regionalist in first place. Cultural institutions like museums and art galleries, and institutes for higher education and research have been the chief patrons of critical regionalist architecture in India (Figure 3). Critical regionalism served the public housing sector in postcolonial India to a great extent by addressing the rustic lifestyle needs of people migrating from rural centres to urban India. However, since the economic liberalisation of the 1990s, urban India has developed a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and thus regionalist housing schemes have petered out.

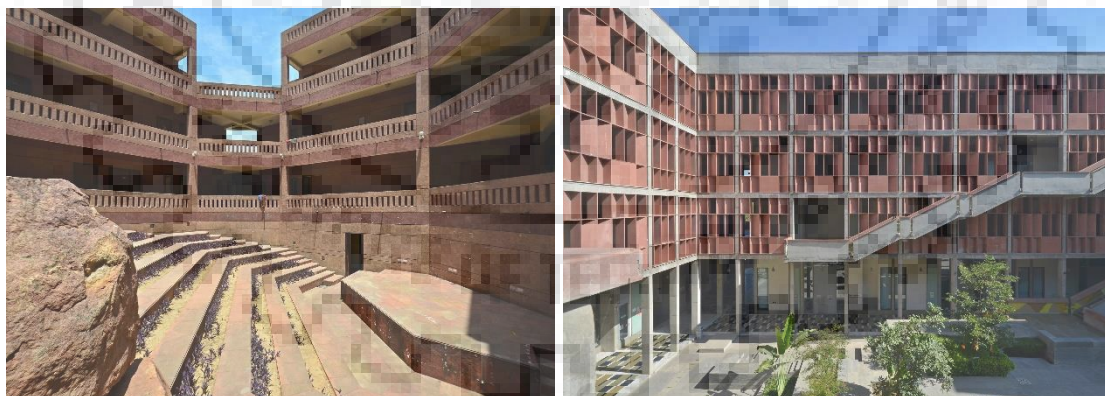


Figure 3: Left: National Institute of Immunology, New Delhi (1985) by Raj Rewal; Right: Ahmedabad University's Institute of Engineering and Technology, Ahmedabad (2015) by Vir Mueller architects (Photos: Author)

Many building types such as schools, resort hotels, religious institutions and healthcare facilities that did not adequately experience regionalist architecture in the twentieth century are discovering the promise of the critical regionalism and have started to provide greater patronage to regionally responsive

architecture in the twenty-first century. While the critical regional approach has resulted in some remarkable office buildings, government buildings, factory buildings and shopping centres, it has not been able to wield adequate influence over these building types due to the differences in priorities of these sectors and the concerns of critical regionalism. Nonetheless, critical regionalism has found expression in nearly all building types and has also managed to produce noteworthy architecture in each building type. Accordingly, the study has produced a historical account of critical regionalism in diverse building types in India.

5. Intricacies of practicing Critical Regionalism in India

To gain in-depth understanding of the strategies, mechanisms and tools employed by architects practicing critical regionalism in India, nine regionalist architects were interviewed as part of this study. Reputed Indian architects like Sanjay Mohe, Ashok B Lall and MN Ashish Ganju, among others, were interviewed to obtain crucial insights into their design approaches. By analysing the responses of the nine regionalist practitioners, the study learns how they place their designs in the urban fabric, how traditional architecture influences their design solutions and how sociocultural concerns are addressed in their architecture. In addition, the study finds out how regionalist architects employ modern technology in their architecture and how do they address the air-conditioning needs, if any, in their buildings. Lastly, the study uncovers the difficulties faced by regionalist practitioners in India and how they foresee the future progression of architectural regionalism in India.

Heterogeneity being an intrinsic property of critical regionalism, the peculiarities of the regionalist discourse in India are revealed through the interview study. The study learns how the existing planning norms in the country – being based on modernist principles – discourage a continuous relationship between built-forms and their context. Besides, quite often the urban character surrounding building sites in India is poor and architects rather have to confront it. Regionalist architects also reveal how they have to deal with certain negative aspects of the sociocultural situation in India including the menace of frequent vandalism and the lack of building maintenance. The challenges faced by regionalist practitioners in India have also been disclosed, in particular having

to motivate building contractors to accomplish their designs, educating clients regarding basic architectural values and overcoming the bias in the building sector for reinforced concrete construction.

6. Regional Assertions in the Architecture of Delhi

In order to understand better how the principles of critical regionalism are integrated in architectural works, the study analyses five key regionalist buildings constructed in the Delhi metropolitan region in the past four decades (Figure 4). The different approaches adopted by regionalist architects in dealing with local climate, topography, materials and sociological complexes have been observed and reported. The five case studies were limited to the Delhi region to highlight that critical regionalism is capable of producing varied architectural responses even when external influences are more or less uniform due to the close proximity of building sites.



Figure 4: Left: *Development Alternatives Headquarters, New Delhi (2008) by Ashok B Lal;* Right: *Dilli Haat Janakpuri, New Delhi (2014) by Archohm Consults (Photos: Author)*

While responding to the urban surroundings of the building sites in Delhi, although most architects chose to relate their built-forms to certain neighbouring urban forms or topographical features, others simply used humility in their architectural expression out of respect for the surroundings. Varied lessons from the region's past, for instance, organisation of building blocks based on layouts of typical Indian villages or bazaars, and interlinking of courtyards based on plans of imperial palaces, helped regionalist architects in dealing with contemporary conditions. Thick walls, deep balconies, sunscreens, pergolas and carefully-designed fenestrations were some of the passive climate-control devices which had been used frequently in Delhi's regionalist buildings.

As a variety of indigenous materials are readily available in the Delhi region, different kinds of local materials such as brick, sandstone, bamboo, Delhi quartzite stone, stone aggregate plaster and compressed earth blocks were used in Delhi's regionalist buildings. Employing local materials along with labour-intensive construction techniques also allowed the local workforce to participate in the construction process. The study also reveals how imported technologies were effectively localised to suit the needs of the community. Furthermore, by examining how each attribute of critical regionalism is integrated in each of the five regionalist works, the study is able to highlight that critical regionalism is not a style but a philosophical framework that affords full discretion to architects in selection of external influences and the final amalgamation between them.

7. Contribution to the Field

This research contributes in raising awareness of regionally responsive architecture, guiding architects, urban designers, developers and policy makers in achieving responsible and humane architecture by clarifying how principles of critical regionalism may be applicable to any design problem. Learnings from this research can lead to a more culturally enriched architecture that better fulfils the future needs of our society.

8. Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis comprises of the following six chapters:

Chapter One: The Research Context – Introduces the topic, its background, its relevance, and the methods of investigation adopted.

Chapter Two: Critical Regionalism in Architectural Theory and Practice – A comprehensive review of scholarly literature on the topic of critical regionalism is presented.

Chapter Three: An Account of Critical Regionalism in Diverse Building Types in Postcolonial Indian Architecture – A historical account of critical regionalism in diverse building types in India has been produced.

Chapter Four: The Complexities of Practicing Architectural Regionalism in India – The results and analysis from the interview study conducted with the practitioners of critical regionalism in India are presented.

Chapter Five: Regional Assertions in the Architecture of Delhi from the 1970s to the Present – Analyses five key architectural works realised in Delhi in the past four decades that integrate the ideas of critical regionalism in their designs.

Chapter Six: Summary and Conclusion – Summarises the findings of the study and offers recommendations for further research.

9. Published Sections

Part of the content of the research developed as part of this thesis has been published in the following forms:

- **Bahga, Sanyam,** and Gaurav Raheja. “An account of Critical Regionalism in diverse building types in postcolonial Indian architecture.” *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, Vol-7.4; 2018. pp473-496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2018.09.001>
- **Bahga, Sanyam,** and Gaurav Raheja. “A Study of Regional Assertions in the Architecture of Delhi from the 1970s to the present.” *Buildings*, Vol-9.5; 2019. 108. <https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings9050108>

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