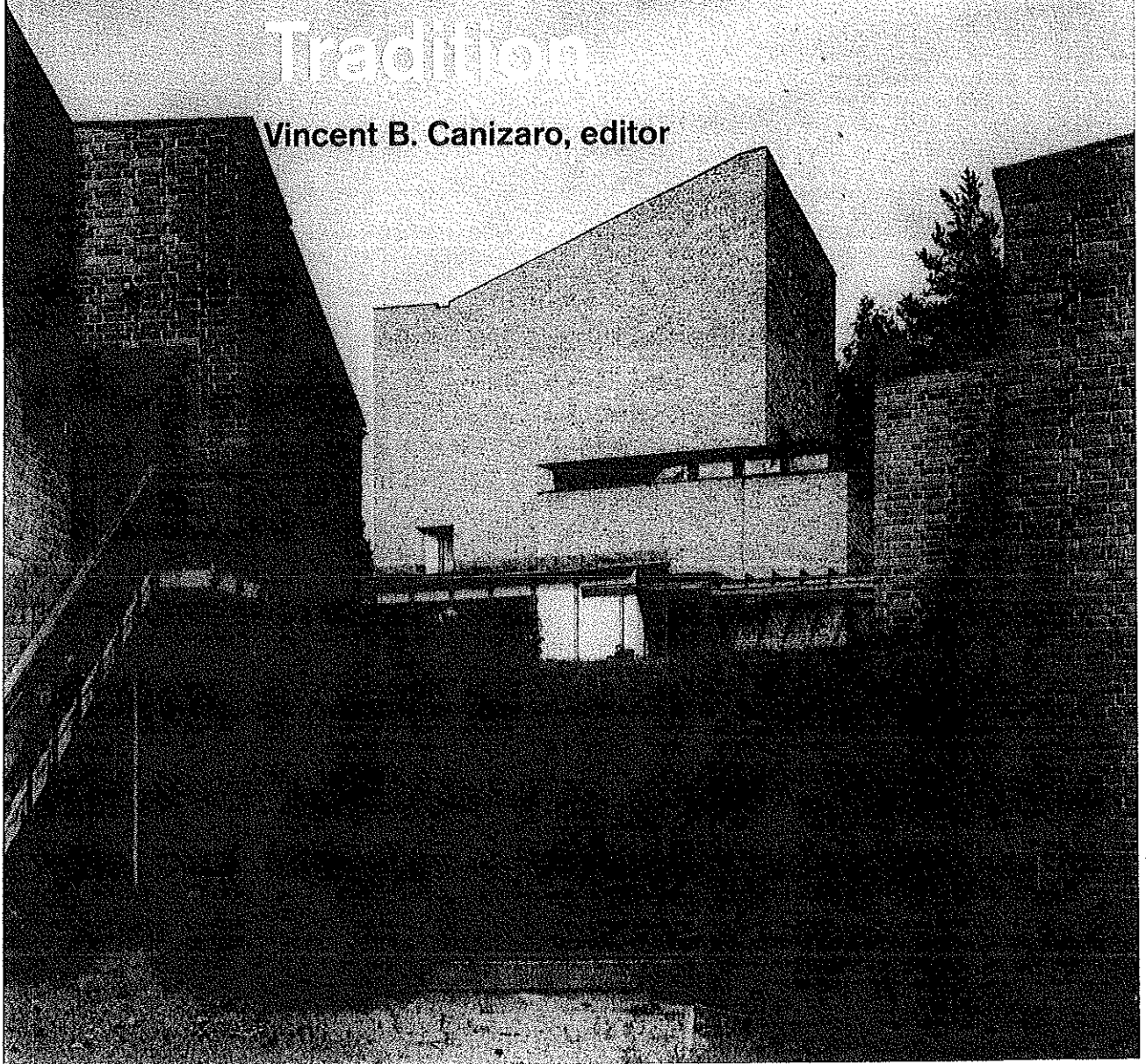


Architectural Regionalism

Collected Writings
on Place, Identity,
Modernity, and
Tradition

Vincent B. Canizaro, editor



The Promise of Regionalism

In 1952, Lewis Mumford edited and published his *Roots of Contemporary American Architecture*. Mumford was concerned about the inaccessibility of many important writings in American architectural history, calling it "a gap that was a disgrace to American scholarship."¹ He remedied this by editing a collection of essays by seminal figures in American architecture including Louis Sullivan, Calvert Vaux, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gustav Stickley, Sigfried Giedion, and Matthew Nowicki. It became a popular textbook. His aim was to establish the deep roots of an *American* modern architecture as a continuous history in an attempt to make clear that it was more than a reaction to European ideas.

Fifty-three years later, with a more specialized but analogous concern, I seek to remedy the inaccessibility of texts in the discourse of architectural regionalism. Like Mumford's American modernism, regionalism has deep roots that demonstrate its perennial importance to architectural practice. These roots defy the standard assumption that "critical regionalism" is the only regional theory worth consideration. While it is the most recent, it is by no means alone. There exists a healthy literature that documents the changing, but consistent, dissatisfaction with design theories or other wider social forces that do not respect the immediacy and situatedness of everyday life. These forces, be they the siren song of the International Style, the emancipatory technological possibilities of machines, the enhanced availability of *everything* for purchase, the demands to remain on the cutting edge, or the invisible forces of laissez-faire capital development have been resisted or redirected by regionally inspired architects since the early twentieth century. But this is only the recent history, as the roots of a self-conscious regionalist theory lie in ancient Greece and later in the Italian Renaissance.

This collection focuses on these more recent regionalisms, beginning with David Williams and John Gaw Meem's optimistic and defensive response to the eclectic historicism of the late nineteenth century and the increasing importation of European modernist architectures. It ends with the identification of present and future possibilities by scholars knowledgeable about the history of regionalist theory and practice. In between it documents the importance of regional planning, bioregionalism, and the lost legacy of regional modernism pioneered by a number of mid-century architects. And if this collection has done nothing more than present the thinking of Lewis Mumford to a post-postmodern architectural audience, it will have justified its existence. No one

can surpass his prescience or the comprehensiveness of his concern for the liberative possibilities of modern architecture and technology. Within the feeble efforts of New Urbanism, the delicate and articulate site-specificity of Glenn Murcutt, the burgeoning possibilities of Landscape Urbanism and Civic Environmentalism, and the still-pregnant possibilities of sustainability are the reverberations of Mumford's democratic and regionalist vision. But he is not alone. The words of H. H. Harris, Mary Colter, Benton MacKaye, Jim Dodge, and Wendell Berry, among others, echo his concerns and provide inspiration on their own terms.

This is not to say that this discourse has been consistent or organized. Putting together this anthology has been much like organizing a convention. It helps to imagine the authors (theorists, architects, historians, polemicists, and social critics) assembled as if they were attending a conference on the means toward achieving a balanced and good life. Their concerns touch upon the issues of quality of place, personal and cultural identity, and the effects and possibilities of modernity and technology. What becomes apparent in the diversity of discussions is a common concern for life balanced between possibility and particularity—the regional life. Yet, upon closer inspection, the differences can overwhelm the similarities, as if each regionalist theory, like each region, is distinct and irreconcilable with any other. So setting this rough discourse into a set of coherent panel discussions is only an approximation; its more important role is to enliven discussions and debates about site-specificity, context, globalization, cultural identity, exurbia, blob architecture, and suburban sprawl.

My pursuit of Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis's seminal text, "The Grid and the Pathway," which established the phrase and concept of a "critical regionalism," set this project in motion. That oft-cited work was hiding away in an obscure journal entitled *Architecture in Greece*. After reading Kenneth Frampton's many variations on critical regionalism, I was seeking its roots. I hoped to find a deeper basis for architectural design that took into consideration the people for whom we build, the places in which we do so, and the reasons we employ to guide us. For this, critical theory, which is so powerful as a tool of literary and social critique, was helpful, but only partly so. It seemed to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In critical theory, one's personal or local history was available only through the technique of defamiliarization, lest one fall prey to nostalgia. Comfort of this kind is suspect as it makes society easy prey to commercial and exploitative interests. And yet we all crave comfort, even postmodernists. My disaffection for critical regionalism forced me, as well as a few of my colleagues, to search through the longer-term discourse of regionalism for lessons from those who sought similar goals.

I realize, with this volume, I have entered into the intellectual domain of many thinkers and practitioners whose work I have read, been influenced by, and included or not. I hope this volume represents the variety of those discourses well and exposes the affinity between them regarding a concern for

the good life lived in relation to the specificity of places.

My most unreasonable goal is to foster renewed debate and productive architectural work based on the recognition that *here* and *there* are important but not equally so—a debate that reconsiders the tired notion that the local is a place of lesser achievement and the source of backwardness, provincialism, and chauvinism.

My thesis is that regionalism, as a set of practices and theories, is a misunderstood and neglected discourse that, in practice, is central to architecture. In the same way that “all politics are local,” so it is with architecture, whether by accident or design.² Regionalism is the preeminent discourse in architecture that focuses on design in terms of particularity and locale. It suggests that local experiences, the kind most of us have most of the time, should serve as the basis for architectural design. This does not preclude the myriad and powerful issues any field allied with art may entertain, including experimentation, expressiveness, and the necessity of challenging ourselves to think; it simply reprioritizes those concerns so that local quality of life is always at the forefront.

For all this, regionalism must be more than design by appliqué or reference alone. It must foster connectedness to that place and be a response to the needs of local life, not in spite of global concerns and possibilities, but in order to better take advantage of them. And as such, the promise of regionalism in architecture is to re-embed us in the reality and diversity of our local places—critically and comfortably. Regionalism has the potential, through thoughtful reference, to situate us in the continuity of our individual and shared human history. This is why style matters, and it must be taken seriously. Further, there is no reason why regionalism should not be understood as a progressive and high-performance architecture, one that is highly attuned to the constancy and change of the local environment. It should open up possibilities for understanding where and with whom one lives. It should encourage awareness of local climate and the changing of seasons. Lastly it should open up the possibility of shared purpose, in which the concerns of *here* are understood as linked to *there*: ecologically, economically, and socially.

Introduction

Regionalism is not a fixed concept.

No region, whether natural or cultural, is stable.

— Felix Frankfurter¹

In other words, the nature of a "region" varies with

the needs, purposes, and standards of those using the concept.

— Merrill Jensen²

Regionalism suggests a cure for many current ills. Focused in the region, sharpened for the more definite enhancement of life, every activity, cultural or practical, mental or liberal, becomes necessary and significant; divorced from this context, and dedicated to archaic or abstract schemes of salvation and happiness, even the finest activities seem futile and meaningless; they are lost and swallowed in a vast indefiniteness.

— Lewis Mumford³

01 Situating Architectural Regionalism(s)

A survey of architectural regionalism spanning the twentieth century yields a heterogeneous collection of motivations and prescriptions—an ongoing theoretical discourse. This may suggest that the variety of regionalist positions are part of the pluralistic attitude considered endemic to postmodern theory, where no singular view is taken to be dominant. All views are competing versions of reality in the postmodernist "sensitivity of inclusion."⁴ It may also suggest that heterogeneity is intrinsic to regionalist theory, in which there is not one but as many regionalisms as regions, each specific to its locale and historical circumstance. As such, it is a kind of meta-theory that has only local application and meaning. I think it is fair to say that both are the case; in part, this has much to do with the lack of clarity with which regionalism is understood and practiced. It also has to do with tensions inherent to its dialectical structure. Regionalism is never a singular theory or practice but is most often a means by which tensions—such as those between globalization and localism, modernity and tradition—are resolved.

As a subset of architectural theory it has persisted through many wider historical movements including romanticism, eclecticism, revivalism, modernism, and postmodernism. It has served variously as a counter argument and ally to these movements from the Renaissance to the present. Its most ancient origins lie in the Persian overland road system, the Hellenic *oikumene*⁵ model of governance, and later Roman imperial practices of territorial management. In the case of the Romans, regionalization referred to both a network of roads connecting its provinces to the central cities and the practice

of governance in which locals were allowed to maintain some local expressions, beliefs, and rituals as long as their allegiance and taxes were returned to the capital city.⁶ An architecturally specific Roman form of regionalism has been cited by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre—the regionalism of Vitruvius.⁷ In his treatise, discussing the proper siting of buildings, he speaks of natural relations between the qualities of a place and the health of its residents. Sensibly he suggests the avoidance of low, hot, and wet places for their potentially unhealthy conditions and recommends those with plenty of sunlight and fresh air. In what can only be understood as an environmental determinist extension, he associates the character and intelligence of people with their place of origin. His linking character to region is not an acceptance of regional cultural variation, which is central to social and cultural identity, so much as a region-based chauvinism, a precursor to nationalist movements that would give regionalism part of its negative association.

Much of the theoretical terrain of regionalism is laid bare in these two early examples. Vitruvius demonstrates both prescriptive and proscriptive kinds of theory, the former captured in his intent to establish new norms for practice, and the latter in his clear suggestion of what should be avoided in the siting and design of cities and houses. With the Roman examples, regionalism has ties to political order, including both control and resistance; this is true to the root word, *regere*, which means “to rule.” Resistance and control are evident in the political savvy demonstrated by the Romans in allowing local expression as a means to achieving overarching rule. Even if this practice is evidence of the practical inability to quash those local cultures—both support the notion of regionalism as a theory of resistance, which is central to much of its contemporary meaning.

Like theory in general, regionalist theories speculate on, anticipate, and catalyze architectural practice in a variety of specific ways. Among those ways are suggestions for normative practice, polemical diatribes, defensive argumentation, rational analyses, and calls to radical action. What they share is a rough consensus—the goal of establishing connections, through architectural means, between people and the places in which they live, work, and play. This localization is the “alternative” offered by the theory taken as a whole.

As a theory about connectedness to place it is situated among other theories of place such as contextualism, site-specificity in art and design, landscape urbanism, and planning. It is allied with other disciplines concerned with spatial phenomena such as cultural geography, cartography, folklore, and historical studies, but it differs from these in scale and application. At the scale of a region, issues and concerns emerge that are not available at the immediate site or context. Thinking in terms of the region grounds these studies within a larger physical and ecological context, in areas that are sufficiently large enough to support a diversity of human and non-human life, through agriculture, available resources, and provisions for adequate recreation. Watersheds, topographical difference, areas of distinctive land use, climatological difference, and consistencies of architectural, cultural, linguistic, and political organization are criteria available to the regionalist for consideration in the design of

environments for those places. Further, thinking in terms of regions affords architects the opportunity to derive unique and relevant environments from a specific and local context with a wider perspective.

By virtue of its manifold relations to human life, regionalism is also situated among theories of culture and concerned with issues of individual and cultural identity, authenticity, meaning, and the structure and governance of society. The disciplines of cultural studies, cultural criticism, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy (particularly phenomenology and critical theory), which address the effects of modernization and modernity, globalization, and technological development on individuals and society, are all allied disciplines from which architectural regionalists draw and to which they contribute. Architectural regionalism differs from these other disciplines in its relation to practice. As opposed to the process of analysis and description, which attempts to remain somewhat neutral, practice is virtually always polemical and its theorization, prescriptive. Regionalism may borrow the critique established in critical theory, but it does so from the perspective of practice, that is, with the aim of applying critical analysis to a situation to focus what needs to be done. As such, regionalism, whether in planning or architecture, may be thought of, in part, as the practical application of the social sciences—a sort of rough synthesis of allied disciplines.

02 Provisional Definitions

Region

A region is, first, a large area with boundaries determined by a range of cultural and natural criteria. At the extreme cultural end, visible in the etymology of the term, political control or the establishment of jurisdictions is the criterion. At the opposite end, region is determined by naturally occurring physical features. These can include the tributary area and drainage of watersheds or biotic shift, a discernable and measurable difference in plant and/or animal species that roughly defines boundaries.

Between these extremes lie the more common physical determinants, such as climate ("the arid Southwest"), topographic landform ("the hill country"), and cultural determinants such as distinct lifeways, patterns of land use and organization, finance and interchange, language use and inflection (dialect), distinct modes and materials used in construction, and styles of architecture. Together or individually, these criteria can yield the boundary or center by which a region is determined. The centrally defined region is important to consider, as boundaries are often difficult to establish clearly. In environmental studies, the concept of the ecotone is specifically intended to designate the area between ecological regions, where many of the richest transactions occur. Like those of the ecotone, regional boundaries are fuzzy and indeterminate; the edge is most often a gradation rather than a starkly drawn line, the exception being political criteria, where the often arbitrary lines tend to be all too clear.

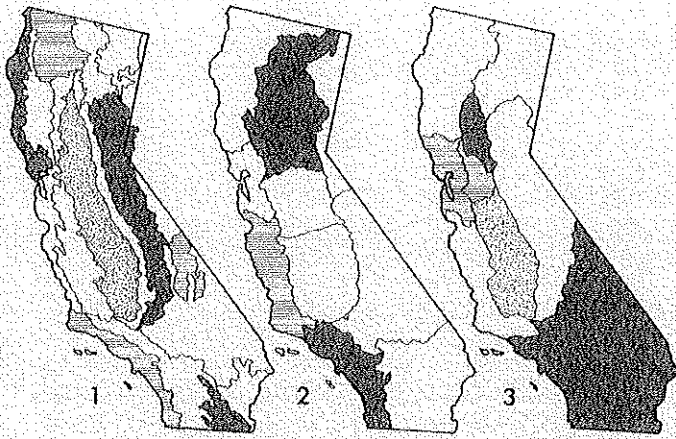


FIG. 1 Competing interpretations of California's bioregions. Key: Regions determined by 1. biotic shift; 2. watershed; and 3. landform.

Accordingly, regions range dramatically in size, again, varying according to the cultural and physical influences. For this there is no consensus. "The Columbia Bioregion" and "the South" both encompass many politically derived states, but they are commonly understood as regions. At this scale, Joel Garreau has proposed dividing the United States into nine regions according to various criteria. Alternatively, maps developed by a wide variety of interest groups—the Forest Service, ecologists, and anarchic bioregionalists—demonstrate a variety of ways groups have determined regional divisions in the state of California alone. [FIG. 1] But perhaps the most important concern with regard to the size of regions is the potential to support a democratic and participatory life for those that will (or already) inhabit them.

The criteria and issues associated with size are not, however, to be understood as arbitrary choices—though arbitrary choices are available in the determination of regions. Each kind of regionalism or regionalist ideology addresses the "appropriate" criteria within its theorization, and these specific criteria often define the theory itself. For bioregionalists, the definition of a region is based on ecological parameters, specifically watersheds. Under the Regional Planning Association of America and Lewis Mumford, the region is determined according to a calculus that considers political representation and the likelihood of political participation along with resource availability, pre-existing patterns, lines of transit, and the transport of goods, all tempered with a concern for social life and local meaning. In critical regionalism, under Kenneth Frampton, it is defined by a culture's unique identity, manner of place-making, architectonic strategies, qualities of the environment in dialogue with local means for coping with that environment, and possible tactile experiences that may enrich one's being there.

Outside of theory, which, by definition, proposes alternatives to existing conditions, regional definition is popularly determined by the criterion that addresses an area's most prominent aspect. "Appalachia" is one such region, based on the presence of the Appalachian mountain range. Once established, however, these popular criteria are useful for the development of

regional inventories, or as Patrick Geddes, the influential Scottish geographer, formulated it, regional surveys, which take rigorous account of all features, both cultural and physical, that lie within its roughly defined boundaries. These inventories, and the determinations themselves, require constant revision as regions, and their inhabitants are dynamic, not static or singular entities.

Regionalism

Regionalism is a habit of thought or a prejudice in favor of persons and practices found in one's general vicinity. Its meaning is similar to that of provincialism, although regionalism lacks this word's connotation of small-mindedness and lack of sophistication.

—Jonathan Smith⁹

Regionalism is variously a concept, strategy, tool, technique, attitude, ideology, or habit of thought. Despite its many manifestations, collectively it is a theory that supports resistance to various forms of hegemonic, universal, or otherwise standardizing structures that would diminish local differentiation. These theories propose alternatives in the form of methods and criteria for the respect, revitalization, and, if necessary, reconstruction of life along regionally determined lines. It is a self-conscious set of theories, which distinguishes it from the vernacular—the response to local conditions by necessity, not by choice. ^[FIG. 2] The vernacular is often characterized dubiously as “unconscious,” which is meant to suggest that it is not purposely regional, but only accidental; in fact, settlers and other pioneers very scrupulously and consciously adapted the architecture they knew to the places they chose to settle. Regionalism is voluntary; alongside being self-conscious, it is a choice made by a practitioner (planner, architect, or politician) among alternatives, including competing theories of regionalism.



FIG. 2 A case of adaptation to place (climate) by necessity. Butler Dogtrot, Old Natchez Trace, Mississippi.

Regionalism is distinct from provincialism, although the two share status as specifically geographic terms. Marc Treib locates the heritage of provincialism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions of political realignment in the United States, where it is used primarily as an administrative term.⁹ In cultural affairs, provincialism has a predominantly negative association, shared by regionalism in some critiques, referring to work that is limited or unsophisticated. Provincial works, Treib asserts, are distinct from regional ones in that provincial works are limited by their distance from a cultural center, such as New York or Los Angeles, in which the standards for excellence are set. Regionalism is the opposite, in that it resists the values of the centers of standardization and taste, actively promoting the local—"the regional is fertilized by its locale."¹⁰

Outside of architecture, regionalism is often used in more strict accord with its Latin roots, in terms of a political strategy or schema for land division by such criteria as historical situation, geographic specificity, etc.¹¹ In design, this way of thinking is most closely met in the theories of Lewis Mumford and the bioregionalists, the latter of whom seek ecological adaptation and the restructuring of political jurisdictions along ecological boundaries.

In architecture regionalism commonly refers to the establishment of connections between new works and pre-existing local and regional characteristics. For some, this process of response is quite prosaic, and sometimes regionalism is minimally interpreted as a response to the local climatic conditions or specific topography. It is minimally adaptive and acclimatizing. For the majority of others, collected here, it is an architectural theory, informed by particularist values, that borders on ideology. These values range from the desire to preserve a region's cultural heritage to the desire to manifest a new social and political order drawn along regional distinctions. The latter aims to facilitate a restructured and more vibrant social life; the former, an ideology of resistance to both the homogenization of building culture and/or centralized, absolutist controls. It is a living concept, the specific definition of which must grow and change just as regions must be continually redescribed.

Between these polarities lie the many variations included in this collection. The consistent themes are resistance to standard forms (preferring a balance between universal and local), a concern for authenticity (the key to cultural and personal identity), and the fostering of connectedness among people of the specific culture, history, identity, and ecology of their region.

03 Dialectical Oppositions in Architectural Regionalism

Despite the fact that the essays collected here have been arranged in chronological and ideological categories, regionalist theories in architecture do not present themselves in this neatly ordered way. The discourse of regionalism is suffused with inherent tensions—a set of dialectical structures that underlie and unite the diversity of regionalist theorizations.

Resistance & Response

In the twentieth century, from Lewis Mumford to Kenneth Frampton, resistance has occupied the center of regionalist discourse. Regionalist resistance can be political and representational, concerned with the maintenance of personal or local identity through form, as that demonstrated by Crescenzi in Rome or the English Picturesque landscape design.¹² Modern resistance continues this tradition, but instead of a pope or a king, the dominant force has become the changing structure of society and the built environment under disinterested central organizations, industrialization, modern technology, and globalization. Each has enabled the erosion of valued practices and places against which engagement—relating to one's place through participatory design—or designs that foster local material and social connections serve as the resistant means.

Such resistance is often achieved through response. Responding to local concerns and to local needs can halt these centralizing, generalizing forces. Contrarily, response to these same local needs can occur without such social or political motivation. This is the central goal in normative regional practices. Like the vernacular builder, normative regionalist architects often characterize their work as a response to the local conditions of climate, topography, local needs, and the availability of materials. It is a regionalism based in successful performance relative to local conditions. In such cases, social and economic relations are perceived as more stable and the concerns of political or social disenfranchisement or inequity are ignored or muted.

Imitation & Invention

At the heart of the regionalist dialectic between imitation and invention is a need to establish a relationship between people and place—between the requirements associated with imitation and the desire for invention. Imitation is the direct taking of form, motif, detail, or the like, and repeating it as faithfully as possible. Invention seeks precedents as inspiration for the creation of something new (see Speck, Chapter 2, and Harris, Chapter 2). Imagine two architects using a set of industrial sheds of particular formal appeal as a precedent. The imitative architect will redeploy the form, material, and detail of the original in new materials, trying to match the original closely in the hopes of deriving respect and connection through recognition. The practice of imitation is thought to provide cultural continuity. The inventive architect's redeployment may only concern the essence or aspect, spatial or formal, of the original, and the resulting regional evocation is more subtle and often more profound. In such instances the vernacular supplies insight into local experiences, rather than a stock of overtly recognizable forms and materials.

Tradition & Modernity

The dialectic of tradition and modernity is inextricably linked to the struggle between necessary cultural continuity and the desire for progress and innovation. For sociologist Anthony Giddens, tradition is "a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the