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Review

Sabine Marschall and Brian Kearney (2000) *Opportunities for relevance: architecture in the new South Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa

Lindsay Bremner

Sabine Marschall and Brian Kearney have, in this book, produced the first systematic prescription for architecture, the architectural profession and architectural education in post-apartheid South Africa. They have succeeded in collating and articulating the search for a genuinely South African architecture evident in the writings and practice of many architects in the country concerned with the redress of the legacy of apartheid and the reflection of the value systems of a transforming society.

In this sense, the book gives a competent and thorough overview of current practice. Through extensive interviews with practitioners and educators and referencing to existing writings or conference papers, the authors have succeeded in drawing together what have, until now, been fragmented or unrelated views and approaches.

These are brought together under the rubric of ‘relevance’ (1). In the authors’ view, an architecture which rejects universal formulas, the imitation of universal paradigms or the uncritical embrace of stylistic or technological fashions, and which gives architectural expression to local climate, landscape, materials or cultural values is ‘relevant’ to our transforming society. This architecture works within the constraints of a low budget, is socially empowering (it puts social objectives on an equal footing with material ones), it is climatically appropriate, uses local materials and local skills, is ‘humanising’ and creates enjoyable and culturally appropriate spaces with those who are to inhabit it.

Having set out these principles and objectives, the authors proceed to elaborate the various pre-conditions for a relevant architecture to emerge
and examine the work of architects currently engaged in such work. For instance, in what is to my mind the most useful chapter in the book, the chapter on community participation, the principles and problems of participative practice are examined. This is done largely, though not exclusively, through interrogating the work of CS Studio in the Western Cape in the early 1990s (14-40). Problems inherent in this approach, such as mistrust, disrespect, having to endure long meetings, lack of maintenance, vandalism etc are identified and possible solutions proposed.

Subsequent imperatives identified in the book include how to bring quality to design in a ‘dirt poor’ context (41), architecture as process not product, the importance of environmental responsiveness in design and appropriate technology and materials. These more technically driven concerns are followed by chapters which explore aesthetic and space making principles and what it means to produce ‘culturally relevant architecture’ (157-183). The concluding chapter examines the implications for architectural education of the programmes advocated in the preceding chapters.

As an architectural educator, I identify strongly with the ideological position the book adopts and with its promotion that architects pro-actively engage with the material, intellectual and cultural challenges of our transforming society. As such, it is a great introduction to architecture for undergraduates and should be prescribed for all students of architecture. However, its shortcomings lie precisely there. In what seems to have been an attempt to simplify, clarify and make accessible complex debates, the book has resorted to a prescriptive, problem solving style. The word ‘should’ appears often in the text. Critical, theoretical, or dialectical positions or arguments are not explored.

Its arguments draw considerably from, though never refer directly to Frampton (1983) in which a position of ‘critical regionalism’ was first articulated. In that article Frampton develops the idea of regionalism as a form of resistance to the universalising tendencies of modern architecture. Marschall and Kearney couple this form of cultural resistance to social reconstruction, producing an idealised continuity between the two.

This has the effect of eliding the complex and often contradictory relationships existing within culture, within society and between society and cultural production. For instance, Said (1983:135) speaks of having contradictory feelings of affection and revulsion towards the description ‘humanist’. Marschall and Kearney hold ‘humanist’ as being unquestionably
good. Similarly, Said (1983:136) argues that ‘culture’ works effectively to ‘make invisible and even impossible the actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power and military force on the other’. Contradictions such as these are lost in Marschall and Kearney’s idealism.

Recently in an interview, a local anti-neoliberal activist said to me ‘Our leaders dream different dreams from those they dreamt in 1994. Then they dreamt of reconstruction and development, now they dream of global competitiveness’ (Ngwane 2001). In doing so, he was articulating the shift that has occurred in South Africa over the last seven years. The brief period between 1994 and 1999 when the kind of architecture described in this book did reflect the social and political aspirations of those in power has, to a large extent, been superceded. Now conference centres, airports, casinos and secure residential neighbourhoods for corporate executives appear to be as patriotic and central to the national vision as creches, clinics or schools. Does the same criteria of ‘relevant’ apply to these building types? Are only certain building types and architectures relevant? Do only certain professional commissions require relevant responses and others not? What would a relevant shopping centre look like and how would it be designed? Are the fake Italianate spaces of Monte Casino any more or any less relevant to our society than the monumental forms of the Mpumalanga legislature? These questions highlight the somewhat superficial, idealised conception of architecture prescribed in Marschall and Kearney’s book and expose their own ideological position. Our society is complex and transforming in unexpected and contradictory ways. Unless these are acknowledged and incorporated into any discussion of the nature of architecture, it is likely to become more deeply divided against itself than ever.

References