Process over Product, Technique over Taste:
The Treehouse of 21 Foster Street

Our moms said it when giving us dating advice, our second grade teachers preached it when introducing us to literature: don’t judge a book by its cover. The motto seems a cliché to us now – we know that there might be some personality behind that mouthful of braces; we know that there might be an exciting story between those bland covers. The adage so easily applies to objects (and people) that are intended to serve a greater purpose than just visual appeal, but what about to objects like art? Rarely do any of us approach a hideous sculpture and immediately say to ourselves, “I don’t really care what it looks like, it’s all about what the ugliness represents!” However much we might try to interpret the sculpture’s significance, if does not appeal to us aesthetically, we struggle to appreciate it as much as we might a copy of *Harry Potter* bound in a brown paper bag.

At first glance, the treehouse behind the house on 21 Foster Street in Newton, Massachusetts is nothing remarkable – it is a boy with a mouth full of braces, a book with a boring cover. Lofted in an oak tree on a grassless, toy-stricken, far-from-idyllic backyard, the treehouse immediately reads as amateurish: the siding warps, drill holes encompass almost every screw, the trim boasts several shades of white, and, if a leveler were placed on the floorboards, it would reveal that the treehouse sits at a half-degree tilt. (Fig. 1) One would also quickly notice that the design of the structure mimics that of the residence sharing its property. (Fig. 2) Its railings are the same style, its roof shingles are the same material, its siding panels are the same width, its paint is the same generic beige, its trim is the same (or similar) shade of white, and its windows are the same size as the ones on the house’s third story. The two even face the same direction.

Because it appears to be a mere imitation of the house that shares its property, this treehouse does not seem to the naked eye to reflect a concept called critical regionalism, an approach to cultural documents that fundamentally encourages rebellion against homogeneity, against banality, anchored by
the specificity of local culture and environment. Imitations such as this treehouse are, by their very nature, homogenous with the structures they copy, do not contribute original ideas to their habitat, and thus do not appear critical regionalist. However, the very process by which this treehouse was built entirely demonstrates the concept’s underlying principles; the structure should thus ultimately be perceived as critical regionalist despite the fact that its appearance could better reflect the concept. The treehouse of 21 Foster Street serves as a reminder that critical regionalism, although a dictator of taste on one hand, is a dictator of technique on the other, and a cultural document must be analyzed much farther past its appearance if it is to be honestly critiqued—it must not be judged by its cover.

Just like boys and books, the concept of critical regionalism is nothing if not complex. As outlined by Alison Calder, a theorist who authored “What Happened to Regionalism,” the approach calls for connection to place, “what place means,” and “the factors [that] combine uniquely in particular locations.” (Calder, 1) Simply put, the concept favors objects that reflect their individual environments. Calder argues that cultural documents have all but lost this valuable sense of place, and she does not stand alone. Keith Eggener, among other analysts, suggests that modern architecture often does not reflect the culture of its location. While he ultimately concludes that the idea of critical regionalism undermines its own objectives in practice, thus rejecting Calder’s support for the concept, Eggener appreciates its intentions, urging that “the voices of those responsible for building particular cultures” dictate the work produced by that region. (Eggener, 235) In other words, Eggener holds the individuals who create the culture of a place responsible for creating its architecture. Another voice in this conversation, Kenneth Frampton, expands on Calder’s and Eggener’s perspectives by emphasizing that critical regionalism should “be regarded as not a style… but a process”; he asserts that critical regionalism should dictate solely the way in which a structure is built, not necessarily the design of the structure. (Eggener, 229) In such a way, Frampton implies that, when interpreting a work of art, one should consider how the piece was created rather than merely its physical appearance—this perspective echoes many sentiments behind that of “don’t judge a book by its cover.”
Before one can truly interpret an object through the lens of critical regionalism, he would be well-advised to firstly contemplate its creator, as this knowledge directly applies to Frampton’s concept of process. Therefore, in the case of the treehouse of 21 Foster Street, one would do well to know that two 18-year-olds who had never so much as drawn a blueprint or worked a power tool designed and built the structure. I was one of the “architects,” (the term doesn’t really suit me well given that that treehouse was the first and only construction I have ever worked on,) and my classmate, Caitlin Connelly, was the other.

In evaluating process, a critic might also examine an artist’s inspiration; just so, one would benefit from understanding why we two, inexperienced teenagers built a treehouse.

In the spring of our last year of high school, all seniors were offered to skip the last six weeks of classes to work on a project of their choosing. Many students opted to work at a non-profit organization, and, unsure of what we wanted to do, Caitlin and I explored the same route. I grew up in a town incredibly invested in an organization called The Second Step, a shelter for battered women and their children. Caitlin and I were excited about the idea of getting involved with the non-profit, so we decided to take a look at the residence for inspiration. We took a quick tour of the house, and, on our way out, we caught a glimpse of the backyard. The ground was covered in wood chips rather than grass, and the only items to be found were a plastic picnic table, a dilapidated metal play structure, and a mess of tricycles and half-inflated basketballs. After brainstorming a few ideas, (one being planting some grass,) Caitlin and I came up with the idea of a treehouse.

The fact that two teenage volunteers fundraised for, designed, and constructed The Second Step’s treehouse embodies Frampton’s idea of a critical regionalist process. Because members of the Newton community are so involved with the non-profit, they are very much a part of its culture; the treehouse would have catered much less to this characteristic if, for instance, a single donor paid for a team of professional construction workers to create the product. The involvement of the entire surrounding neighborhood plays into this notion; Caitlin recalls that “the community was so supportive of the idea and enthusiastic about our initiative… [that] we reached our fundraising goal in only a couple days.” This way in which the treehouse was created would hold value in the eyes of critical regionalists, as it achieved a
connected, locally-embedded process. Because The Second Step, as an organization, was built by the
effort of its community, critical regionalists would delight in the idea that its tree house was as well.

Caitlin and I inadvertently aimed to incorporate critical regionalism into the design of the
treehouse by having the children living at the shelter paint a mural on one side of it, a feature we thought
would reflect the culture of The Second Step, a feature that Calder, Eggener, and Frampton would
certainly classify as critical regionalist. As mentioned previously, Eggener urges that “the voices of those
responsible for building particular cultures” should also dictate the work produced by that region – the
children of The Second Step certainly embody the culture of the organization, as they comprise the
majority of its residents. (Eggener, 235) As Caitlin recalls, “There was a little boy, Anthony, who came out
and watched us almost everyday when we worked on construction. He always asked to help, so we liked the idea of a mural because it would give him and the kids a chance to feel included in the project. It would also give them something to remember after they left the shelter. It would make it feel more like home.” This concept of home plays a large role in many theorists’ definitions of critical regionalism:
Lewis Mumford, an American historian, suggests that “regional forms are those which… most fully succeed in making a people feel at home.” (Eggener, 228) In other words, a structure is considered regionalist if it somehow reflects what “home” means to those who inhabit it. Individuals often correlate home with a sense of belonging, a sense of place, emotions that the treehouse could have embodied if the children of The Second Step were given the opportunity to contribute to it.

Despite our intentions, the idea of a mural was not ultimately realized. As Caitlin and I discovered when filing a building permit for the structure, 21 Foster Street lies in a historic district of Newton, and any structure built in a historic district must be approved by the historic commission of the given town. Outlined on the website for the Historic Commission of Newton, “the purpose of establishing the local historic districts is to preserve and enhance the streetscapes and overall community character” and “to ensure that the new elements… are appropriate to the historic character of the districts.” After hours of debate at City Hall, which many members of the Newton community attended to support our cause, the commission decided that the mural would not preserve the character of its district. Rather,
Although the shape of the structure was deemed acceptable, we were asked to mimic the residence itself in color, materials, trim, and the direction it faces.

This intervention from the historic commission constitutes a decidedly non-regional imposition on the treehouse. In constructing his argument, Eggener employs the career of Mexican architect Luis Barragán to articulate that one aesthetic does not and should not represent all of a region’s, nor should outside forces dictate the style of a location. When Barragán’s work first surfaced in the mid-1970s, Mexicans essentially rejected the architecture; however, after it was featured in New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1976 and was awarded a distinguished international prize – one that was voted upon by Americans, English, and Japanese – the work was accepted and praised by its country of origin. (Eggener, 230) Eggener claims that Barragán was “at that time the only Mexican architect recognized outside of Mexico” and stresses that, “where one [style]… prevails, others have been submerged or suppressed.” (Eggener, 230-231) In other words, because Barragán’s work dominated international conversation, other Mexican architecture went unnoticed, unappreciated. The critic thus indicates that, rather than being approved of organically within Mexico, one aesthetic was imposed on the country by external forces.

The critical distortion of Mexican culture by this board of foreigners resembles that of The Second Step’s culture by the historic commission. The commission, comprised of individuals uninvolved in the non-profit’s community and thus uninvolved in its culture, dictated what style would best reflect the character of the area, just as Americans, English, and Japanese – who are, by their very nature, uninvolved in Mexican culture – dictated what style best reflects the character of Mexico. Unlike members of the historic commission, who did not live in the community surrounding The Second Step, individuals who resided in the neighborhood did support the mural, as demonstrated by their generous donations and their appearance at the meeting to advocate for our original design. As the commission itself states, its role is in part “to preserve and enhance… community character,” yet its members, according to Caitlin, “didn’t once bring up what The Second Step is, what it stands for, or what it means to Newton.” Calder would thus also disapprove of the commission’s role, as the concept of place seemed not be have been taken into account in the board’s decision to prohibit the mural.
Due largely to the whims of the outsiders who comprise the Historic Commission of Newton, appearance is the least critical regionalist aspect of the treehouse of 21 Foster Street. As defined by its supporters and its skeptics, although it does often aim to work against modernism, critical regionalism does not call for simple mimicry of historic structures of a place, as the treehouse seems today. Because the history of a location so often ties into the place’s identity, critical regionalists suggest that it should be incorporated but that the product should simultaneously reflect current culture. While Newton does maintain strong ties to its history and thus to a certain style of architecture, the town is also defined in many ways by its relationship with The Second Step, and this aspect of the town’s culture is not represented in the treehouse. Nonetheless, as Frampton emphasizes, architecture should be judged as much by its appearance as a book should be by its cover, as a prepubescent boy should be by his braces, so the distinctly critical regionalist aspects of how the treehouse was created should play much more into our evaluation of the structure than its mere design. Consequently, although the treehouse seems to aesthetically neglect critical regionalism, the structure should ultimately be perceived as a critical regionalist document due to nothing more than the process by which it was built.

Just as it did in its construction, the treehouse continues to embody the culture of The Second Step today. As Caitlin remarks, “Whenever you visit, you can always see at least a handful of kids playing in [the treehouse]. One boy even told me that it’s his favorite thing about the shelter.” The Second Step exists to create a home for battered women, yet it also aims to do so for their sons and daughters; the treehouse helps accomplish this goal by providing these children with a space they can call their own, that fosters a sense of belonging, a sense of place. The story of this seemingly unremarkable structure exemplifies the notion that, when critiquing an object through the complex lens of critical regionalism, one must always consider process – and purpose – over product. The true value of architecture lies far beneath its appearance.


Figure 1: The treehouse of 21 Foster Street / Caitlin Connelly

Figure 2: 21 Foster Street / Google Earth

Project Postmortem

This project was quite unlike any piece I have written in the past, and I found several of the writing concepts we have discussed in class to be helpful in tackling it. For instance, the notion of “audience” helped me in shaping my argument, as I had to illustrate the treehouse and summarize a critical debate in order for the topic to be palatable – this process inadvertently helped me formulate a thesis. The most useful writing concept for me in this project was “motive.” I spent a substantial amount of time working on the The Second Step’s treehouse, whether it was fundraising for it, designing it, building it, defending it, or, given the outcome of our meeting with the historic commission, venting about it. The treehouse thus holds a great deal of significance to me, so I had a strong interest in finding a compelling purpose for my paper. Due to my pride in the structure, my inherent appreciation for the idea of process over product, and my dislike for the role of the historic commission in banning the mural, I think I was unknowingly a firm believer in critical regionalism before even learning of the concept. If I hadn’t felt such a strong connection to this topic and consequently hadn’t had quite as strong a motive, I don’t think I would have felt I truly had something important to say in this paper, nor would I have felt so invested in trying to say it.

WRITING 05.028 (w16) Project 1 Feedback and Evaluation

Formative Response:

Your project was on solid footing when you submitted your conference draft.

For future projects, there are a few things you should focus on:

- We talked about the fact that your first-person subject justified some atypical design decisions about your introduction and your structuring. I think those remain the right decisions in this case. Project 2 will require you to follow a different path, though. There, you’ll be required to formally identify method in a separate section and formally identify a limited, case-level question and a larger significance. The creative balancing of all of those features in this document probably won’t work for an adapted IMRD structure.

Comment [NVK17]: That certainly comes through!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Feature</th>
<th>Description of project quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style; mechanics; formatting</strong></td>
<td>In many cases, the essay offers a creative, accessible voice, one that is deeply personal and engaging. At other times, the document slides into a pretty formal, impersonal style. In places, that formal style causes some disruptions in clarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience (excluding other rubric elements)</strong></td>
<td>You provide valuable contextual information about the case and about the critical debate, and you explain key ideas and quotations accessibly. Your unique approach—which coyly hides some information in order to reveal it later—exhibits some complex thinking about audience experience. I think it's overall rather effective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argument; Thesis</strong></td>
<td>You offer a clear motive mechanism in the introduction (one that is evoked through a narrative device rather than through a formal explication). It's effectively presented genuinely motivated. What's more the conclusion offers a convincing broader significance for the claim you advance. I think that's a remarkable success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence; Archive</strong></td>
<td>Your evidence has some inherent limitations, given that the events were not documented at the time. Given those limitations, I think you did an excellent job. You offered relevant and adequately detailed evidence to support the claims you advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Logical Structure; Arrangement</strong></td>
<td>This is an unorthodox evidence-based document. You use some strategies that are not often seen in this kind of writing context. We spoke about those strategies in conference, and I think you manage them quite well. You did strive to produce clearer topic sentences here and clearer logical transitions. The shape of the document is really marked by those unorthodox decisions about arrangement, particularly in the way that narrative sometimes precedes the claims you want the narrative to support. I think that foregrounding narrative might have made your logical structure less accessible for your audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application of Debate; Use of Critical Lens(es)</strong></td>
<td>As we discussed in conference, the project does a nice job of generating valid interpretive questions by engaging the terms of the debate. I think you explain those terms fairly clearly, and you certainly put them to productive use. I think the document’s critical summary section early on might have been more organically structured, though. The paragraph reads a bit like a list of ideas rather than a showcase for a unified way of thinking. Ideally, you would have found a way to help us come away from that with a focused idea.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>