The Treehouse of 21 Foster Street

At first glance, the treehouse behind the house on 21 Foster Street in Newton, Massachusetts is nothing remarkable. Lofted in an oak tree on a grass-less, toy-stricken, far-from-idyllic backyard, it 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. One also quickly notices that the design of the structure mimics that of the residence sharing its property. 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 houses 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 the concept of critical regionalism, an approach to architecture that fundamentally encourages rebellion against homogeneity. However, the very process by which this treehouse was built entirely demonstrates the concept’s underlying principles; therefore, the structure should ultimately be perceived as critically regionalist despite that its appearance could better reflect the concept. This example 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.

The concept of critical regionalism is nothing if not complex. In discussing the state of architecture and other forms of culture in modern society, Alison Calder poses a single, captivating question: “What Happened to Regionalism?” As defined by this author, the approach calls for connection to place, “what place means,” and “the factors [that] combine uniquely in particular locations.” (Calder, 1) Regarding her initial inquiry, the critic 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
concept of critical regionalism undermines its own objectives in practice, thus rejecting Calder’s support for the concept, Eggener supports its intentions, urging that “the voices of those responsible for building particular cultures” should also 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.

Before one can truly interpret an object through the lens of critical regionalism, he would be well-advised to contemplate both its creator and its inspiration. A critic could comment on the painting *The Scream* for hours on end based solely on the expression upon the subject’s face and the colors of the sky in the backdrop, but his arguments would be considerably enriched if he knew about the artist, Edvard Munch, whose struggle with insanity could very well have prompted the work of art. Similarly, in interpreting 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. Lastly, just as a critic would benefit from understanding what inspired Munch to paint his most famous work, 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 organization, 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. As Caitlin remarks, “it seemed like the perfect way to help a great community of families.”
As one supporter of critical regionalism, Kenneth Frampton, emphasizes, the concept does not pertain to just style, but process. The fact that two teenage volunteers fundraised for, designed, and constructed The Second Step’s treehouse embodies this very idea. Because members of the Newton community are so involved with the non-profit, they are very much a part of its culture; the tree house 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 community 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.” Because, as an organization, The Second Step was built by the effort of its community, critical regionalists would delight in the idea that its tree house was as well.

Caitlin’s and my initial design was not far off from the structure that stands today. However, one main feature is missing from the final product. We originally hoped to have the children living at the shelter paint a mural on one side of the treehouse, a feature we thought would, reflect the culture of The Second Step, a feature that Calder, Eggener, and Frampton would certainly classify as critically 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 make up the vast majority of the residents living at the shelter. (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 a mural 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, as individuals often correlate their idea of home with a sense of belonging, a sense of place.

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. As 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.

Although they might disagree on the validity of critical regionalism in practice, both Calder and Eggener would criticize the role of the historic commission in the design of the treehouse. In constructing his argument, Eggener employs the career of Mexican architect Luis Barragán to articulate that one man’s aesthetic does not necessarily represent all of Mexico’s; rather than being approved of organically within Mexico, the style was imposed on the country by international forces. When Barragán’s work first surfaced in the mid-1970s, Mexicans essentially rejected the architecture; however, after the work 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 – it was accepted and praised by its country of origin. (Eggener, 230)

This board of foreigners and its significant role in the architecture of Mexico can easily be correlated to the historic commission and its role in the design of The Second Step’s treehouse. 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 rather than members of the area itself, 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, individuals who lived in The Second Step’s neighborhood did support the mural, as demonstrated in their generous donations and their appearance at the meeting to advocate for the 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 decision to prohibit the mural.

Due largely to the whims of the outsiders who comprise the Historic Commission of Newton, appearance is the least critically regionalist aspect about 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 believe that it should be incorporated but that the product should simultaneously reflect current culture. While Newton does have 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 its culture is not represented in the treehouse. Nonetheless, as Kenneth Frampton emphasizes, critical regionalism should be thought of as much less a style than a process, so the distinctly critically regionalist aspects of how the treehouse was created should play much more into our judgement of the structure than its mere design; in other words, the process of the treehouse’s construction represents it as a document more than its appearance. Consequently, although the treehouse seems to aesthetically neglect critical regionalism, the structure should ultimately be perceived as a critically regionalist document. The story of this seemingly unremarkable structure exemplifies the idea that, when critiquing an object through the complex lens of critical regionalism, one must always consider process over product.

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