

Cultural Imaginings and Climate Change – Has the Time for Critical Regionalism Finally arrived?

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In mid-March 2020 my friends and I sat in the front bar of an inner-city Adelaide pub and watched as thousands of people made their way to the east parklands to enjoy the last days of the [Fringe Festival](#). Walking down a crowded street, shoulder to shoulder with other hot, sweaty citizens were an enduring image of the world village in the globalised post-modern city.

The next week, as the world shut down, [drones flew above our cities](#) streaming images of [empty streets](#). These sights became the [subject of our media](#) with perhaps the strangest being the silencing of the planet. The sudden lack of planes, trains and automobiles gave us unexpected visions of the impacts of climate change on our planet. From the newly [cleared waters of Venice](#), through the unfamiliar visibility of the Himalayas in the Jalandhar district in [Punjab, India](#), to the kangaroo loose in the city of [Adelaide, South Australia](#), nature was, as the infamous @shitadelaide Instagrammers suggested, ["healing"](#).

Over the next few months, the initial shock of lockdown was replaced with rousing claims of 'rebuilding' through ['local tourism](#), local manufacturing and local supply chains. Ideas around sustainability and [localisation](#), both issues that had been growing in importance since the 1980s, were increasingly discussed as integral to the 'next normal'.

Yet, seven months into a global pandemic and it seems that we are no closer to either a bipartisan or a global discussion about climate change.

While we struggle to find a cultural imagining that can position the 'local' and 'sustainable' at the heart of our collective futures, I am reminded of two events that, together may offer some initial imaginings: September 11, 2001 and 13 March 2020.

I've often thought that the fall of the World Trade Centres on September 11 signalled a second end to modernist architecture – the first being the 1972 demolition of the social housing complex, [Pruitt Igoe](#).

Modernism with its "...[mass, surface and regulating lines](#)" turned out to be resilient and while it [rarely concerned itself with sustainability](#), modernist architecture thrives in our cities in the form of slender skyscrapers named "[supertalls](#)". These 300 metres plus [additions to our global skylines](#) seem to have finally begun discussing sustainability just as it would appear that they have [fallen out of favour](#).

While modernism has proven itself to be remarkably durable, its antithesis, "postmodernism" may well have come to an abrupt end on Friday 13th March 2020. [Jencks](#) describes a postmodern world as one that has moved from having "...*bounded, national cultural cultures to one that has city-based identity, and at the same time, part of the well-publicised "world village"*" (p 5). Postmodernism created new types of citizens with the ability to travel broadly, mix freely with other cultures and stay connected through new media, all of which "*collapsed the usual space and time boundaries*" (ibid p16).

This was the world village that had become the norm in the 30 years since Charles Jencks first began writing about postmodernism. It was these world citizens who were crowded around the gates to Albert Park, Melbourne on Friday 13th March 2020, when the Australian Grand Prix was suddenly cancelled leaving thousands of [confused and angry spectators](#). On this day, the Prime Minister of Australia announced that [mass gatherings would end on Monday](#).

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The global city, together with its global citizens has gone now, for a while at least. With them go the hubris of post-modern society leaving us to wonder what cultural imaginings we might construct to ensure that sustainability and the impacts of climate change are central to visions of our collective futures.

As I try to reconcile an adult life lived-in post-modern times I am reminded [of Frampton's](#) seminal writings where he discussed a vision for the future that he named "critical regionalism". Frampton used the metaphor of 'land' to describe how the specific "culture of the region", its history in both geological and agricultural sense, could form the foundations on which future industries and activities were formed. He had a global vision for the world that allowed for different identities, histories, and urban fabrics while allowing for the "contingencies of climate". Central to this vision was the idea that universal citizenship could be created while maintaining a critical, self-conscious commitment to a particular place. His was a belief in the 'local'.

Critical regionalism was a concept that was broad enough to embrace and embed world cultures within local areas while supporting and enabling universal citizenship. Importantly, critical regionalism was built on a defined relationship between nature and industry, allowing the scale and types of industry in a region to reflect the culture of its citizens while being sustainable and innovative.

Essentially, Critical regionalism took the best from localism without throwing away everything we got from the global village of cooperation and ideas.

So, in these uncertain times, is it possible that postmodernism will give way to critical regionalism to structure debates that embed climate change and sustainability? If we look back to Frampton could we create collective visions of local yet universal sustainable futures? In our Covid19 world, could critical regionalism offer cultural imaginings that embed climate change? If so, what might the world village look like in the future? Is it an image that we can grasp?



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