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The Village at Breckenridge: An Impossible Balancing Act

Deep within the Rocky Mountains in Colorado is the small ski resort town of Breckenridge. Its idyllic setting is reflected in its rugged and natural style, albeit with all of the conveniences of modern technology. A seemingly beautiful example of critical regionalism, an artistic style that combines modernist techniques with a unique regional flair. It is an oasis of rugged log cabin- and gold mining-themed architecture. Nowhere is this style more apparent than at The Village at Breckenridge, a condominium complex set right at the base of the ski slopes. Although at first glance The Village is a beautiful example of critical regionalism done well, it is in actuality two isolated islands of design; the modernist exterior is so separated from the regionalist interior that any sort of meshing between the two styles is far from apparent. The unsuccessful efforts of the designers to blend two fundamentally different styles sheds light on the complex balance between old and new that is required by critical regionalism.

Critical regionalism, as defined by Kenneth Frampton, is an artistic style that aims to “mediate the universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place” (Frampton 21). It is, in essence, a way to combat the encroaching of modern homogeneity on regional cultures by creating art that incorporates elements from both modernism and regionalism. That does, however, require a fine balance, as not enough modernity would be nostalgic regionalism and not enough regionalism would come across as a gimmick. Critics of critical regionalism, notably Keith Eggener, maintain that this blending requires a balance of both sides that is, in reality, impossible to achieve. Because, he argues,

“critical regionalism is itself a construct most often imposed from the outside” (Eggener 228), critical regionalist design is in effect trying to find the intersection between modernism in disguise and modernism in plain sight, an intersection that does not exist. So then what does Breckenridge have to do with all of this? The Village, without a doubt, can be considered as a critical regionalist piece. However, within the definition of the term it does not succeed because of the clumsy attempt at blending the two opposing architectural forces.

The interior of the suites are full to the brim with traditional and regional decorations. Overall, the rooms have a very Native American color scheme, with off-beige walls and earthy red, brown, and beige curtains. All of the sidings are finished in a neutral light brown, bringing out the natural colors of the wood. To add to the regional feel, each suite has a wood-burning



Figure 1. The interior of the suites is very nostalgic regionalist, incorporating design cues from the Native American and gold mining history of the region.

stove clad with unevenly cut rocks that are reminiscent of naturally occurring stones. The furniture, too, is very regional in its use of local woods in their natural state.

The dining table has a rough, unfinished quality which is heightened by the sturdy chairs surrounding it. All of the pieces of the chairs are made from carefully processed pine logs that are still twisted in their natural shapes. A chandelier made of elk antlers hangs above the dining table, yet another reminder of the animals of the region. Paintings adorn the walls, presenting local vistas or scenes of native people and animals to the viewer. Also hanging from the walls are faux-traditional tools made in



Figure 2. The chandelier is quintessentially regionalist in its use of actual antlers from local animals, reminding the viewer of the physical place of the Rocky Mountains.

the Native American style, such as wooden skis decorated with traditional motifs and snowshoes made of woven fibers. In the bedrooms, the story is much the same with bedframes made of sturdy pine logs and sheets and comforters carrying the same earthy color scheme of the curtains. The one area that does not share that same traditional feel, however, is the bathroom.

In contrast to the rest of the suite, the bathroom is decorated with modern materials and colors. Vibrant crimsons replace the earthy reds of the living room, and the stainless steel faucets and white granite countertop combine to create a cold, sterilized feel. This was, as a design choice, most likely necessary as a bathroom with the same relatively drab colors found elsewhere in the suite would make it seem run-down and outdated. Still, design-wise the modern bathroom feels very out of place compared to the rest of the suite.

The exterior of the buildings is far removed from the traditional style found inside. Instead of organic forms and natural theme, the lines are crisp and sharp and very rectilinear. Across all of the condominium buildings, there is not a single curved edge to be seen. Every window, every balcony, every protrusion fits together neatly into a grid pattern with clearly defined rows and columns. Its simplistic forms minimize the cost of building the complex, at the cost of losing the Rocky Mountain feel. Arguably, if the buildings were moved into a city anywhere in the country, it would not look out of place. Thus, convincing someone that The

Village was simply a new apartment complex in Boston, for example, would not be difficult. The only slight indication of the actual location of the complex is the color scheme, a mix of earthy beige and red-brown tones.

However, like the interior, there is one feature that attempts to bridge the gap in between new and old:

the fire pit. It is hard to miss as it is in the plaza in the middle of the complex, and has a distinctive faux-traditional feel to it. It is the only structure in the complex to be round rather than rectangular, and boasts a wood-burning fire pit with benches all around it for people to sit and warm themselves up. The shape of the roof is decidedly Native American-inspired, while the faux-stone foundation and dark wooden columns add to the natural feel. In

contrast to the out-of-place bathroom, this was likely a conscious choice by the designers to tie in the modernity of the surrounding buildings with the nature of the location and the ruggedness of the surrounding mountains.



Figure 3. The exterior of the buildings is very simplistic and rectilinear, only showing the heritage and culture of the region in its color palette.



Figure 4. The surrounding modernist buildings only serve to further highlight the regionalist style of the fire pit.

However, The Village at Breckenridge is by no means an exemplar of critical regionalist architecture. While it does contain both modern and traditional design elements, they do not work together to form a cohesive critical regionalist style. The interior coloring and decorations accurately portray the rugged nature-dependent feel that has become synonymous with the mountains. The exterior undoubtedly embodies the principles of simplicity and efficiency that characterize modern architecture. Critical regionalism is defined by “a self-conscious synthesis between universal civilization and world culture” (Frampton 22), but there is no synthesis in the design of The Village. If we consider a style of design (for example modernism or post-modernism) as its own island, critical regionalism represents a large landmass formed from the merger of the two islands of modernism and nostalgic regionalism. The Village, however, is still two islands that are connected by a single, rickety bridge. While the designers attempted to connect the different design styles in both the interior and the exterior of the buildings, only the fire pit succeeded somewhat in that goal. It does represent an oasis of traditional design surrounded by modernism, and offers perhaps a small resistance to overbearing homogenous structures. In terms of critical regionalism, however, it is far too weak of an effort to mesh the two design styles together. The bathrooms of the suites, on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt at bridging the gap between the two islands of design. However, it can just as easily be seen not as a design choice, but a design requirement. As discussed earlier, it is near impossible to represent the Rocky Mountain look in a bathroom while still making it look pristine and up to date. In addition, the brashness of the bathroom design compared to the rest of the suite demonstrates no effort to blend the two styles of design, but seems as if the designers had drawn it up separately and then hurriedly tacked it on. As a whole, The Village fails at effectively merging the two islands of regionalism and modernism. Although, is that merger even possible?

Several simple changes could help the design of The Village more effectively reflect what was originally intended by critical regionalism. The interior would immediately become more forward-thinking in design with a brighter color palette, replacing some of the earthy tones with brighter, more artificial accents. The furniture, although charming, could stand streamlining in form, replacing the clunky, thick legs of the chairs and tables with slimmer branches to get a lighter feel. The atmosphere would also benefit from a change to white paint for the walls and a darker stain for the pine wood throughout the rooms. The same color changes would help the bedrooms feel much more critically regionalist as opposed to nostalgic regionalist, and would also help the bathroom fit in more with the rest of the suite. As for the exterior, the local sort of style is the log cabin, a form pervasive throughout much of the Rocky Mountains. The pillars supporting the balcony would be more regionalist if they were rounder, like pine logs. The balconies in general would benefit from more organic forms, and in general the exterior would be more log cabin-esque if the red-brown sections became more of an authentic wood color. Of course, it is impossible to say whether those changes would really fulfill what it means for architecture to be critical regionalist. While the atmosphere would shift from stuffy nostalgia towards light modernism in the inside and vice versa for the outside, it might not be enough to bring the design to the correct intersection in between the two islands of design (conversely, it could err too much on the side of modernism, and subsequently create a whole other raft of design issues). Point being, the point where modernism and regionalism create a successful synthesis of the two ideas is very difficult if not impossible to pinpoint, but in all likelihood does exist. And in the context of the discussion about critical regionalism between Frampton and Eggener, which side prevails? To a degree, the answer is both. While there is most likely a small area on the spectrum of modernist and nostalgic regionalist architecture in which critical

regionalism exists as Frampton asserts, it is as Eggener maintains impossible to pinpoint (Eggener goes one step further to say that the point that old meets new is itself impossible to achieve, but that could be a product of its difficulty to recognize). Eggener also seemingly contradicts Frampton's view of critical regionalism in saying that it is effectively a construct of the social elite in far-off places who have no real understanding of the nuances of local cultures. This is true, but Frampton specifically mentions critical regionalism as coming from the "peculiarities" of a region indirectly (Frampton 21). In terms of Breckenridge, that manifests itself in the little quirks of the various decorations in the suites, which from a Coloradoan perspective do not seem out of place even though it has been imposed on the region.

It is easy to simply label The Village at Breckenridge as critical regionalism because of its use of both traditional and modern design cues. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the two schools of design have been isolated from each other, creating a rift in between them. Critical regionalism, however, requires the blending of the two styles with each other, in the process creating a completely new style, a style that is very specific and must adhere to a complicated list of principles. So while there are a large number of pieces of art, whether they be architecture, visual art, or performing art, that can claim to be critical regionalist, it is in fact difficult or perhaps even impossible to determine something to be "good" critical regionalism.

Works Cited

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