

Critical Regionalism: An Architectural Identity of cityhalls in Bhutan

Sonam Choden¹, Sehba Saleem²

Civil Engineering and Architecture Department
College of Science and Technology, Phuntsholing, Bhutan

0215212.cst@rub.edu.bt/sonaamchoden000@gmail.com¹, ar.sehba.saleem@gmail.com²

Abstract

Bhutan's transformation to a democratic nation took place about a decade ago while urban governance started much earlier, in the 1990s. Our towns and cities are in the journey of experiencing devolved power and public participation. In this continuous phase of evolving and adapting, Architecture plays an important role in constructing resilient environments. cityhalls are essentially one of the core symbols of democracy, reverberating the community's culture, values and civic pride. However, there has been no architectural identity for townhalls in Bhutan in the last 20 years of urban governance. With this prominent constraint, there are plausible risks concerning the precious architecture of Bhutan and also, in meeting the global standards of urban governance. Moreover, the design of a "Bhutanese cityhall" is likely to encounter struggles in finding a unique ground and identity amongst the homogeneity of today's world. The concept of Critical Regionalism has been conceived in the 1980s, as a standard tool to critique universal modernism in terms of values which are locally cultured. This study uses critical regionalism to strategize design concepts to define the Bhutanese language for cityhalls, where it explores the relationship between Architecture and environment, culture and modern technology. The program for the cityhall design is devised from popular literatures, case studies and international design standards. These strategies are applied in the design of a proposed cityhall for Thimphu, as a final year architectural thesis. The design deconstructs universal trends into local values while defining cityhalls as being more than just institutional buildings. With its foundations on Critical Regionalism, Thimphu cityhall will set the pioneering example for other cityhalls in Bhutan, re-grounding architecture however without stipulating a singular conventional strategy.

Keywords: Architecture, Bhutan, cityhall, Critical Regionalism, Townhall, Urban Governance.

1. Introduction

The phase of modernization taints the general society with the compulsion of rationalization, standardization, and internationalization (Frampton, 2007). Mechanized civilization often dominates the architecture leading it to

mass urban construction. Critical Regionalism is a concept that proves an ideological balance finding the middle ground between modern trends and local culture. It is a dialectic ideology in criticism of global modern architecture while being deeply rooted in the critical local architecture.

Cityhalls are more or less, an international concept of urban governance and specifically, municipal power (Hunter, 2009). Urban governance in Bhutan was established in 1999 with the drafting of the Municipal Act of Bhutan (Ministry of Communications, 1999), although urbanization happened much earlier. The need for cityhalls was realized only in the recent years with rapid growth of population and the urban areas. The governance of modern cities requires modern techniques, and efficiently modern spatial systems (McQuillan, 2019). In this essence, Bhutan is in the need of this modern infrastructure, now more than ever. This poses certain challenges in terms of adequately meeting global standards and more importantly, preserving the local architecture. Bhutan is experiencing a peak period of urban construction and struggling to preserve traditional architecture with international needs.

Cityhalls have been considered as the most important civic buildings in democratic societies. However, for a young democratic nation like Bhutan, whose urban governance started only in the 1990s, cityhalls are yet to be explored and could possibly be a revelation. For the past two decades, municipal governance functioned from structures that were essentially viewed as any other institutional buildings. There has only been a vague idea of the civic pride, often risked with mockery, for such institutions as the core of modern democracy. Therefore, this study initiates discourses on the importance of civic pride, municipal governance and essentially the need for cityhalls.

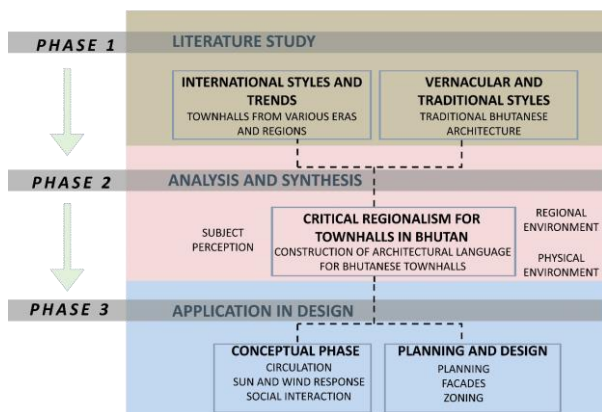
Cityhalls are symbolic, not only of devolved power, but also of their community's culture, status and aspirations. They play a major role in addressing the importance of municipal government to foster sustainable growth of our cities. Thimphu, with its current rate of urbanization, is in dire need for a cityhall, to make a statement of its urban governance. Cityhalls are the repositories of civic pride and local identity. They chart our collective journey from monarchical absolutism to democracy in fostering

sustainable growth of our cities. Therefore, the concept of critical regionalism proves appropriate in the design of a cityhall for Thimphu, the capital city, and the first municipality in Bhutan.

2. Methodology

The study will follow a qualitative method as it relies majorly on non-numerical data (Marjan, 2018). It will also partake phenomenological approach where the universal methods of application can be addressed through the methods of application of critical regionalism in various architectural designs (Marjan, 2018).

Table 1 Methodology, (Source: Author, 2019)



The study aligns to the following research questions:

1. Where are we in the world of homogeneity?
2. What is a Bhutanese Cityhall?
3. How does Critical Regionalism justify architectural design?

3. Literature Review

3.1. Concept

The term *Critical Regionalism* was originally coined by *Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis* (Jiang, 2015). It was later postulated in various disciplines by *Kenneth Frampton*, who provided an explicit review of the concept along with multiple strategies that can be adopted (Frampton, 1983). Frampton defined Critical Regionalism as the fundamental strategy in finding the middle ground from the impact of universal civilization with elements that local and vernacular to the particular region (Frampton, 1983). Similarly, according to *Powell* (2007), this concept seeks to counter standardized models such as building codes with an equal emphasis on creativity, innovation and incorporation of cultural aspects.

Frampton's major focus was on how modern constructions fail to incorporate local aspects into the design (Frampton, 2007). His argument initiated a series

of discourses on how there needs to be an equal attention on the local aspects of the environment as much as there is, on the modern attributes in augmenting the competency in the global sphere.

3.2. Strategic Relationship between Critical Regionalism and Architecture

Critical Regionalism places importance in awakening the local architecture among the universal design trends. However, it may not be solely mimicking traditional architecture (Jiang, 2015). The local architecture must be incorporated rationally and critically. *Ming* (2008) formulated the relationship between architecture and environment, culture and modern technology.

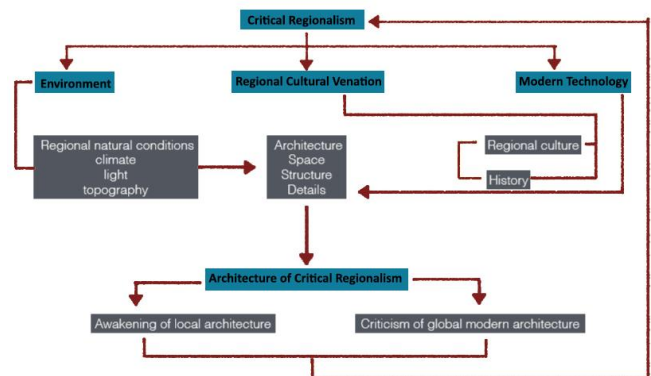


Figure 1 Relationship of Architecture with three factors, (Source: Ming, 2008)

3.3. Case Studies

Three case studies have been carried out for the study based on their selection basis.

1) Case Study 1: Säynätsalo Town Hall, Finland

Reason for Selection: Aligns with the concept of Critical Regionalism

Säynätsalo Townhall is one of the best-known examples of how *Alvar Aalto* implemented the concept of Critical Regionalism. It exhibits the basic strategies of how the design should respond to the environment and culture of the particular region. The design portrays spatial interaction of the structure with the newly-formed municipality. It represents a townhall from the 1930s.



Figure 2 Säynätsalo Townhall, (Source: Keijo Penttinen, n.d)

2) *Case Study 2: London Cityhall, England*

Reason for selection: Represents the transformation of modern cityhall with devolved power from absolute monarchy. It also portrays sustainable design strategies.

London Cityhall, represents the cityhalls of this era, which evolved from the ancient democracy to modern democracy, focuses on the devolved power of the public. It exhibits some of the best sustainable measures in responding to the climate.



Figure 3 London Cityhall, (Source: Fosters + Partners)

3) *Case Study 3: Thimphu Thromde Office, Bhutan*

Reason for Selection: Real time study of how municipal offices function in Bhutan. It highlights the need for a new cityhall.

Thimphu Thromde Office, represents how municipal governance currently functions in Bhutan. It evidently shows how the municipal office is considered just as any institutional office in the city.



Figure 4 Thimphu Thromde Office (Source: Author, 2019)

The application strategy also consists of inferences from the following studies carried out:

1) *Area Program*

The spatial planning of cityhalls vary in each city due to the difference in how each specific government functions within the sphere of culture and environment. However, there are certain global standards that have to be met. Therefore, the program for the design of cityhall in Thimphu is deduced through various studies such as the current existing program, programs in other cities and international design requirements. The inferences are drawn in comparison to the design standards.

2) *Site Analysis*

The site chosen for the design is in Changangkha, Thimphu as Thimphu is the first municipality in Bhutan and it plays a major role in the national urban strategy. The research analysis focuses on how important it is for the designed building to belong to the context of the site. Therefore, an analysis of the site through various parameters is carried out. It gives a detailed background on the site followed by the main analysis, which is done in four main levels; City Level Analysis, Precinct Level Analysis, Site Level Analysis and SWOT Analysis. This understanding will provide the functionality that needs to be taken on the site during the design process. Considering the above-mentioned levels of analyses, the following strategic method is adopted for the main design concept.

4. Application Strategy

The main application strategy of critical regionalism is derived from the literatures presented in the study. The main emphasis has been made on the regional environment and regional architecture from where prominent features are analysed. These features are then translated into design concepts.

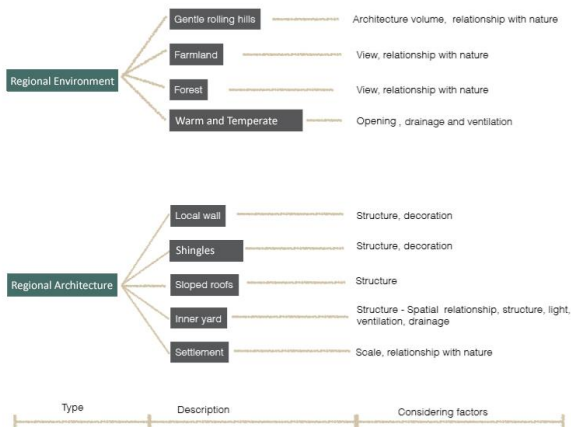


Figure 6 Application Strategy, (Derived from Ming, 2008)

Medium Density, Mixed-Use Settlement

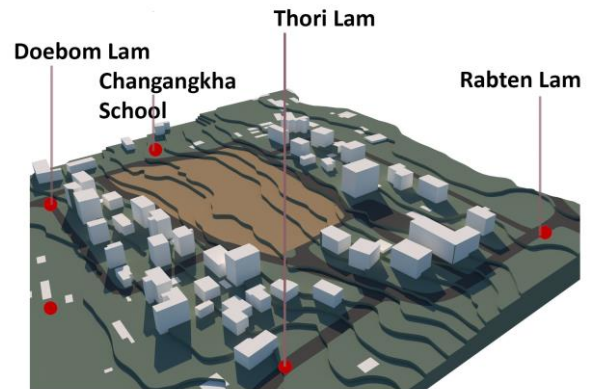


Figure 5 Site Context (Source: Author, 2020)

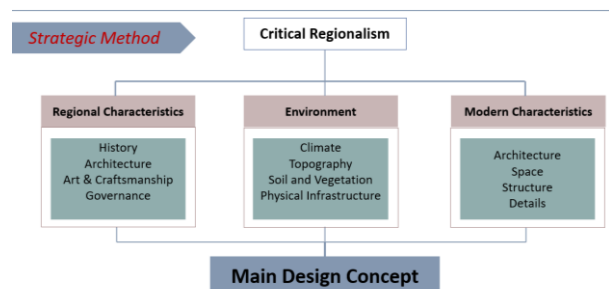


Figure 7 Strategic Design Method (Source: Author, 2020)

5. Application

The main analyses from the concept of critical regionalism are used to devise the main strategy for the design of a cityhall in Thimphu. This segment essentially answers the third research question of the study.

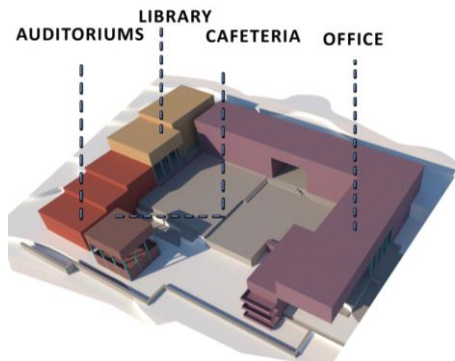


Figure 9 Massing (Source: Author, 2020)

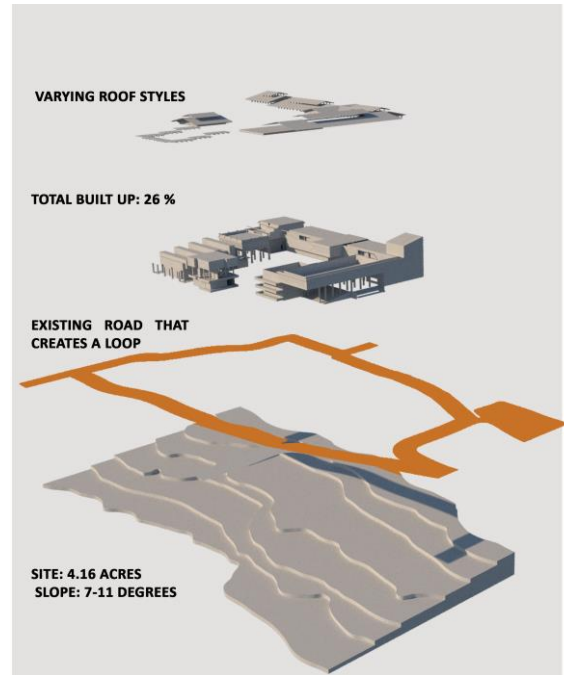


Figure 8 Exploded Axonometric View (Source: Author, 2020)

5.1. Design Translation

The design features an open form, functional facades and liberal design attitude. The design caters not only as the municipal office but also as a public space. Programs such as public library, multipurpose auditorium and exhibition halls are incorporated to encourage public participation and interaction. Moreover, courtyards act as important public spaces in the cityhall.

The blocks form two central courtyards that connect the exterior public spaces.

The total site area is 4.16 Acres with a gradient of slope ranging from 7-11 degrees. Existing roads create a loop around the site. The total built up achieved is 26% which accords to the permissible built-up of the respective precinct. The following Figure 10, shows the site plan for the design.

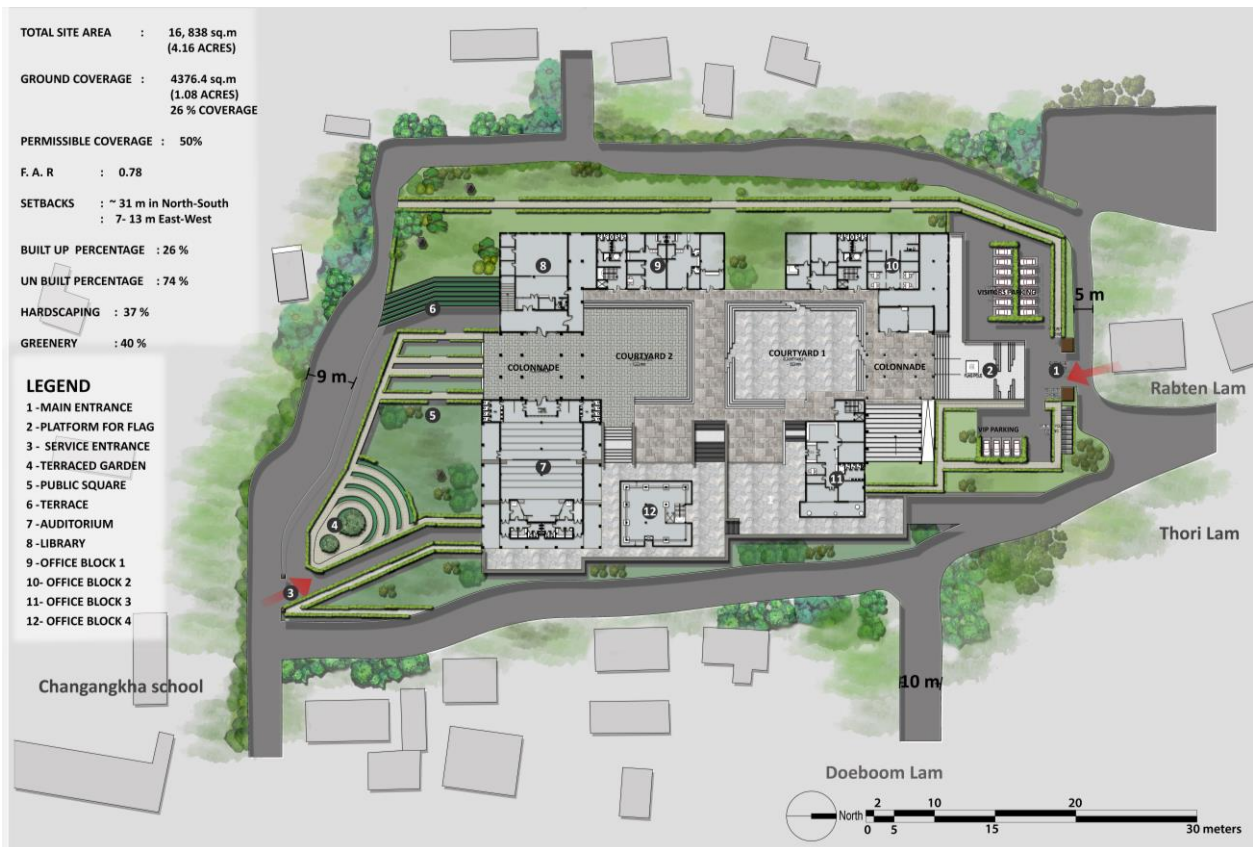


Figure 10 Site Plan (Source: Author, 2020)

5.2. Design Details

The following figures show the design features and details that have been incorporated in the cityhall.



Figure 14 Main Entrance View (Source: Author, 2020)



Figure 13 View from the Public Square (Source: Author, 2020)



Figure 12 View from the courtyard (Source: Author, 2020)



Figure 11 View of the Auditorium (Source: Author, 2020)

The peculiarity of the design is bounded within the limits of its regional and cultural factors (Jiang, 2015). However, the universal drive of modernism has the tendency to construct a building that can be placed regardless of site and its context (Frampton, 2007). To define a Bhutanese cityhall, one has to consider several features from the universal trend and then express it through the local language of architecture. The study follows the application strategy derived from Ming (2008), where local features related to environment and culture are critically analyzed before incorporating in the design.

Therefore, the design reinterprets the traditional elements such as rabsey, windows, tapered wall and hovering roofs. One of the most prominent features of the design is the tectonic arrangement of courtyards. Courtyards are traditionally platforms that encourage public gatherings, ceremonies and interaction.

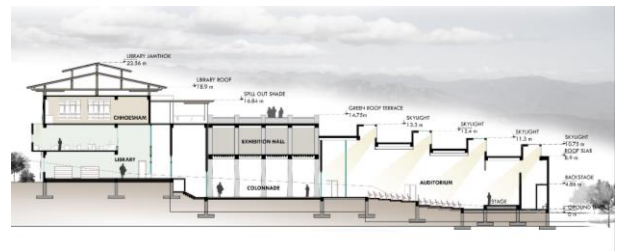


Figure 15 Section through the library and auditorium (Source: Author, 2020)

One of the main concepts of the design focuses on lighting. Three types of indirect lighting have been incorporated in the design. The lighting for the auditorium is through east facing sky lights. The library features a reinterpretation of traditional rabsey, where lighting is provided from the top of the projection.

Similarly, a light shaft provides lighting for the office buildings. The lighting details are shown in figure below.

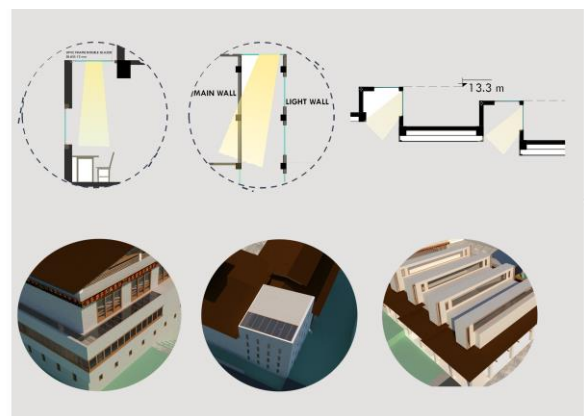


Figure 16 Lighting Details (Source: Author, 2020)

The first detail from the left shows the reinterpretation of rabsey in the library block. The second shows the detail

of the light shaft and the third shows the auditorium lighting.

Figure 17 shows the graphical representation of the division of volumes among different space types in the design. From this volumetric imaging, it is vivid that the design incorporates equal public spaces and office spaces in a cityhall. It establishes a firm statement of how a cityhall serves equally as a public space as an institution space in a democratic society.

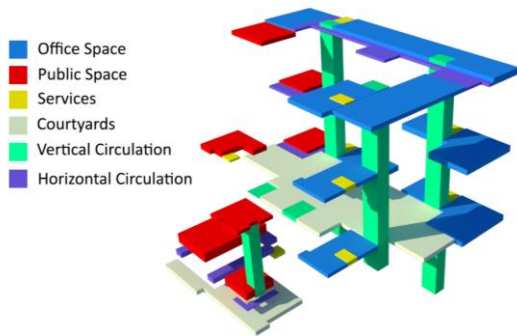


Figure 17 Circulation Diagram (Source: Author, 2020)

Conclusion

This study ascertains the importance of cityhalls in communities where democracy exists. It also states the prominent position of such civic buildings among various other institutional buildings. More specifically, the study has made a rational approach to *define the local language of architecture for the spatial design of Bhutanese cityhalls through Critical Regionalism*. Through the philosophy of critical regionalism, strategic design methods have been derived to plan and design a cityhall. The concept is a prospective approach towards achieving designs that cater to preserve regional architecture but continuously striving to meet global standards. It also provides bases to re-grounding architecture without stipulating a singular design approach. While cityhalls have been viewed as a western concept till date, the study has now proven the possibility of defining a “Bhutanese cityhall.” It has also widened opportunities in terms of improving design elements and features to cater the municipal governance efficiently.

Through the studies carried out, upcoming cityhalls in the other municipalities of Bhutan can base their program, spaces and design scale on this particular design. Likewise, the study also provides detailed data on area statements and space organograms. Overall, the design will essentially set the basis and standards for upcoming cityhall designs in Bhutan. The thesis exhibits the

opportunities that designers and planners have in reinterpreting our rich architecture on a global scale.

Further Research

The study has set the basic understanding of what a *Bhutanese Cityhall* would look like. It has looked majorly into the spatial design strategies and generic ideas of a cityhall. Further studies can be carried out to extend the understanding in terms of technicality, specific design elements and sustainable design features. The following areas can be considered:

1. Determination of Façade Scale for the cityhalls in Bhutan.
2. Public space design standards for cityhalls.
3. Volumetric analysis of a cityhall in terms of different programs.
4. Investigation of critical regionalism as the theoretical basis for design of other buildings.
5. Critical Regionalism in shaping the urban infrastructure and planning.
6. Parking requirement for cityhalls.
7. Spatial Design of cityhall for a digitized governance.

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