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Cultural Identity Construction in Architecture from Glenn Murcutt's Design Philosophy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the construction of cultural identity through architecture within the framework of critical regionalism. The objective is to analyze the design concepts and processes that reflect local identity amidst the forces of globalization. Focusing on contemporary architectural works in Thailand, the research adopts a qualitative methodology, incorporating content analysis, field observation, and in-depth interviews with architects and experts. The findings reveal that critical regionalism is not merely the application of local elements but involves a negotiation of meanings and power between local culture and global contexts. The architectural cases studied illustrate an attempt to articulate a contemporary identity rooted in cultural heritage through forms, materials, and design paradigms. This research argues that critical regionalism offers a meaningful approach for creating architecture that expresses cultural specificity while creatively responding to evolving socio-cultural conditions.

Keywords: Critical Regionalism, Cultural Identity, Contemporary Architecture, Local Design

INTRODUCTION

Glenn Murcutt, a renowned Australian architect, was born in London, England, and grew up in Morobe, Papua New Guinea, as well as in Sydney, Australia. It was during these formative years that Murcutt learned the importance of vernacular architecture from his father, who also introduced him to modern architectural works. Murcutt's early projects reflected the ideals of modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Over the years, Glenn Murcutt has significantly influenced architectural design thinking for many practitioners and has received all major professional architectural awards, including the prestigious Pritzker Prize in 2002. Murcutt's design philosophy draws from nature and the ways humans regulate their body temperature. He once remarked, *"We wear clothes—we put on more when it is cold, and take off more when it is hot. I believe our buildings should respond to climate in the same way."* Guided by this principle, Murcutt designed architecture capable of creating its own shading and ventilation systems. His works are frequently cited as exemplary references in architectural theory. Critical Regionalism is an architectural theory that attempts to reconcile the conflicting ideas between Modern Architecture and Postmodern Architecture. It emphasizes incorporating local or vernacular elements into architectural design in a selective and meaningful way. Kenneth Frampton, in his seminal essay *Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, articulated this concept, while later thinkers such as Shreya Sarin (2020) expanded upon it by referencing works of architects who exemplify critical regionalist thinking—including Glenn Murcutt, who is consistently cited as a key figure. This scholarly discourse forms an essential foundation for the present research.

Research Objectives

1. To study, analyze, and identify the body of knowledge that explains the design methods, thinking processes, and architectural principles of Glenn Murcutt.
2. To examine the congruence or divergence between Glenn Murcutt's architectural design principles and the theoretical framework of Critical Regionalism, leading to new conclusions or debates within the conceptual discourse.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Critical Regionalism was first introduced by Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre, and later expanded upon by the philosopher–historian Kenneth Frampton. In his seminal essay Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance, Frampton presented the concept and illustrated it through the works of various architects, contributing significantly to the theoretical discourse on Critical Regionalism.

Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance

Acknowledge Culture and Civilization / Consider Context

Frampton discusses the impact of civilization on cultural diversity, including technological development and limited financial flows, which, in turn, shape the parameters of urban design in many respects. He notes that architectural thinking is divided into two parts: one that profits from dependence on technology and products, and another that seeks to create compensatory buildings to restore what has been lost from local distinctiveness.

Frampton states: "Twenty years ago, the dialectical interaction between civilization and culture still provided a certain control over the form and meaning of urban structures. However, over the past two decades, the world's urban centers have undergone significant transformation. What remained of nineteenth-century urban structures in the early 1960s has been overlaid by the twin forces of large-scale commercial development and modern transportation. The former has become the primary tool for realizing increased land value brought about by the latter. Typical city centers, which twenty years ago still contained mixed residential, secondary, and tertiary industrial uses, have now become mere burolandschaft—an office landscape: the triumph of universal civilization over locally influenced culture."

Recognize the Rise and Fall of Avant-garde Movements

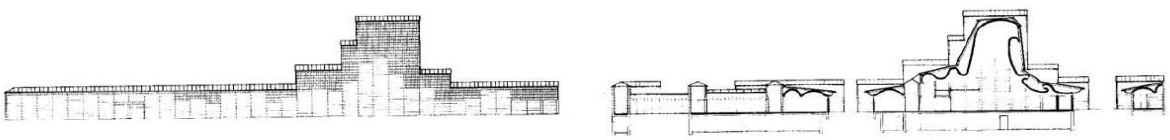
Frampton points out that architectural movements in the mid-nineteenth century—coinciding with the beginnings of industrialization and the emergence of Neoclassicism—marked a revolution that modernized various traditions and cultural expressions. Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts movements, for instance, demonstrated clear opposition to industrial modernity.

Frampton cites examples of avant-garde groups across different eras, noting that their emergence and decline follow cyclical patterns. Many avant-garde movements were eventually absorbed into mainstream culture, leading to the erosion or disappearance of their original ideals. Meanwhile, some evolved into new forms of artistic and technical development, including literature, music, film, visual arts, and architecture.

Relate Critical Regionalism to World Culture

Frampton emphasizes that the fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the homogenizing effects of universal civilization by drawing on elements derived indirectly from a place's specific characteristics. This requires a high level of critical consideration, informed by contextual factors such as local lighting conditions, characteristic structural forms, and the unique attributes of the landscape.

Frampton discusses the Bagsværd Church by Jørn Utzon, built near Copenhagen in 1976. The Bagsværd community had not had its own church since the sixteenth century, until Utzon designed one that embodies a timeless quality. The project is complex and meaningful, derived from the interplay between normative technical rationality and an unusual formal expression. The building's modular grid system and repetitive prefabricated concrete elements reflect universal construction systems. At the same time, the skylight-filtered roof and interior spaces mediate the transition from external surfaces to inner chambers, illustrating the synthesis of universal



Jørn Utzon, *Bagsvaerd Church*, 1973-76.
North elevation and section.

Figure 1: North Elevation and Building Section of the Bagsværd Church by Jørn Utzon, Copenhagen, 1976

civilization and localized spatial experience.

Reinforced concrete in a curved form can be understood as an architectural choice that is not necessarily economical. First, it conveys the symbolic qualities of a sacred space; second, it communicates cultural references. Although natural forces fundamentally shape the main vault of Bagsværd Church, the structure is a religious symbol intended to resist a purely Western or Eastern interpretation. This approach offers a more appropriate means of constructing a church in an increasingly secular age, in which symbolic allusions often lose meaning amid the diversity of contemporary artistic forms. Conversely, this separation of authority at Bagsværd establishes a new foundation for spirituality.

Respect the Resistance of Place Form

Frampton refers to the concept of the "Megalopolis," introduced in 1961 by geographer Jean Gottmann, noting that the idea spread across many regions but not to cities built before the turn of the century. Urban design has increasingly become theoretical, as procedural and economic demands drive modern development. For example, the reconstruction plan for Rotterdam after World War II reflected dramatic shifts in land use, transportation, and distribution. The city's master plan was revised every decade to adapt to emerging spatial conditions. By 1975, earlier cultural and urban aspirations had been replaced by foundational infrastructure planning aimed at forecasting transport needs, land-use change, and the expansion of existing distribution systems.

Frampton also cites Martin Heidegger's 1954 essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," which demonstrates that, etymologically, the German gerund for "building" relates to ancient forms of cultivating and dwelling. Thus, the condition of "dwelling" and ultimately "Being" may emerge within a clearer understanding of place. When applying Critical Regionalism to design, architects must recognize that the physical limits of a place cannot be treated as an isolated architectural object. Space may be defined by enclosure, yet the boundary of that space must serve as the starting point for the identity of place. The spatial organization of a building should be understood in terms of the relationship between its interior and exterior conditions.

Merge Culture and Nature

Frampton emphasizes that Critical Regionalism must relate directly to nature rather than abstract traditions. Modernist architecture often relied on an unmediated, experience-less approach. The mechanized reshaping of land, for instance, is regarded as a rational and economical construction technique—yet it produces a visible conflict between universal civilization and indigenous culture. Experts frequently flatten uneven terrain, whereas terracing the landscape to receive a stepped architectural form is an act of "cultivating" the site. Such gestures echo Heidegger's etymological insights. Similarly, Swiss architect Mario Botta describes "the making of place" as a process in which regional culture—expressed through geological and agricultural history—becomes intelligible through the deliberate "positioning" of a building.

"Tectonic" does not simply refer to construction as a technical necessity, but to the elevation of construction into an art that expresses the functional and symbolic nature of a structure. For example, the fluted Greek column embodies this tectonic concept, where material form inherently communicates meaning.

Involve All Senses

According to Frampton, design should engage not only visual perception but all human senses. Multisensory collaboration deepens architectural experience and enhances spatial uniqueness. This concept encourages the use of materials and elements that evoke tactile, auditory, and olfactory responses, generating a richer emotional impact. Frampton references Alvar Aalto's Säynätsalo Town Hall (1952), where the main stairway leading to the council chamber intensifies sensory experience: the textured brick walls, the friction of the stairs underfoot, and the contrasting wooden floor of the chamber all affirm the dignity of the space through sound, smell, and texture—even through the gentle deflection of the floorboards. Frampton states: "Critical Regionalism seeks to supplement our normative visual experience by emphasizing the sensory perception of the human body. In doing so, it attempts to maintain a balance between the importance placed on images and the Western tendency to interpret the environment solely through visual perspective."

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Questions

- What are the design philosophies, methods, and architectural principles evident in the works of Glenn Murcutt?
- In what ways are Murcutt's architectural principles consistent with or divergent from the theory of Critical Regionalism?
- How might these findings lead to new conceptual conclusions or debates?

Hypothesis

An analysis of Glenn Murcutt's architectural works is expected to reveal strong alignment with the principles of Critical Regionalism, particularly in the relationship to site, climate, and the cultural practices of local communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study collects physical and architectural data on the works of Glenn Murcutt (1936–present), focusing on his early- to mid-career works from 1968 until his receipt of the Pritzker Prize in 2002 (at age 66). A total of 34 buildings are examined to represent 34 years of recognized architectural practice (1968–2002, ages 32–66). This corpus is considered sufficient to analyze his design methods, influences, and conceptual approaches. Due to incomplete or unpublished data for works after 2002, these later projects are treated as limitations of the study. From the available post-2002 information, three buildings were selected for additional comparative analysis.

Classification of Case Study Groups

The 1st Period – Early Phase (1972–1991)
From the beginning of Murcutt's career up to the years preceding the RAIA Gold Medal (1992) and the Alvar Aalto Medal (1992).
The 2nd Period – Middle Phase (1992–2001)
The years leading up to the Pritzker Prize in 2002.
The 3rd Period – Later Phase (2002–2021)
The period following the Pritzker Prize in 2002 up to the present.

Figure 2 Illustrates the classification of Glenn Murcutt's architectural works according to a chronological timeline.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data Analysis / Synthesis Process

Figure 3. Vertical architectural component analysis using the "onion-slicing" method.

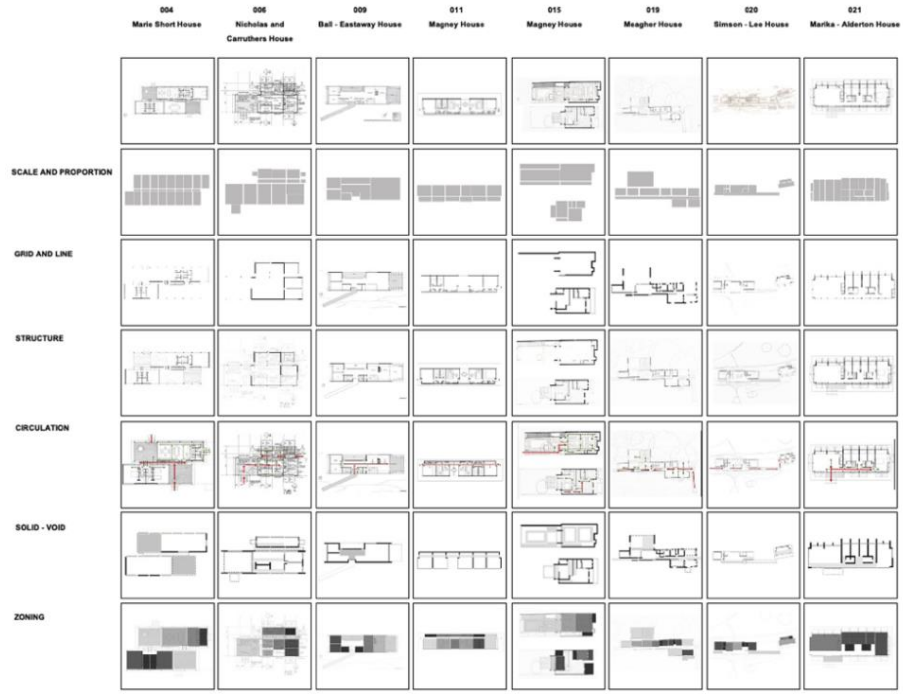


Figure 4. Horizontal architectural component analysis using the "onion-slicing" method.

From the process of data analysis and synthesis, the following conclusions were derived:

The Six Principles of Glenn Murcutt

Principle 1: Deep Listening to the Site

Listening to the site in a profound and intuitive manner.

"If *you take architecture and you cut it vertically and horizontally you understand what it's about now that vertical section and horizontal section allows you to start manipulating their spaces in a way that is inclusive of bringing sunlight in of bringing windy or bring light in or excluding it so, the important thing is to start thinking about prospect and refuge in architecture that ability"* Glenn Murcutt, Spirit of Place

This refers to observing the interaction of the natural systems inherent to the site. As previously explained through the onion cut–to–onion rings analogy, the analysis should consider both horizontal and vertical cutlines. Together, these two sectional perspectives allow for a deeper understanding of the natural characteristics and dynamics of the site.

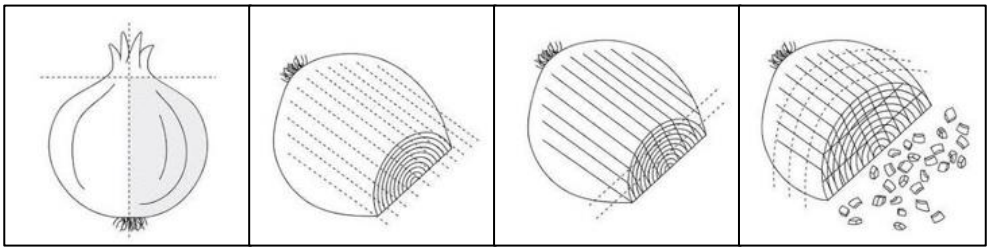


Figure 5. Illustration of the "Onion Cut" concept.

Principle2: Dwelling with Nature

Living as an Integral Part of the Natural Environment.

This stage involves communicating and creating mutual understanding with the building users or homeowners. It requires clarifying the intention of living in harmony with nature and explaining the benefits of such an approach—how it enhances human well-being, reduces dependence on technology, and fosters a greater sense of humanity and respect for the natural world.

Figure 6. Meagher House (1992), Oceania, Bowral, New South Wales, Australia

Principle 3: Creating a System between Architecture and Nature

Establishing an Integrated System that Binds Architecture with the Natural Environment.

This principle employs the use of section sketching as a method for conceptualizing the first design ideas. The initial conceptual sketch (*First Idea = Ideal of Space*) begins with the Box of Space, which is then fused with the natural characteristics of the site. This includes shaping the roofline, creating openings that correspond to the three primary angles of sunlight (*Three Angles of Sunlight*) derived from an analysis of the sun path, and drawing orientational lines that align with prevailing winds, airflow patterns, ventilation, and building orientation.

It also involves addressing the building's relationship to the land—anchoring it to the ground, lifting the structure with elevated floors or entry steps, and designing systems for rainwater collection, which can be used for environmental protection such as safeguarding the house from bushfire zones. All of these elements express a system that harmonizes with the four natural elements: earth, water, fire, and air, represented collectively through a single sectional drawing—one drawing that communicates the conceptual essence of the entire project.

In this principle, the hand-drawn sketch becomes the key highlight—an essential and signature method advocated by Murcutt. He emphasizes the importance of drawing by hand, allowing instinctive human cognition to guide the process. Ideas flow from the mind through the body to the hand, expressed on paper with intuition, emotion, and sensory understanding.

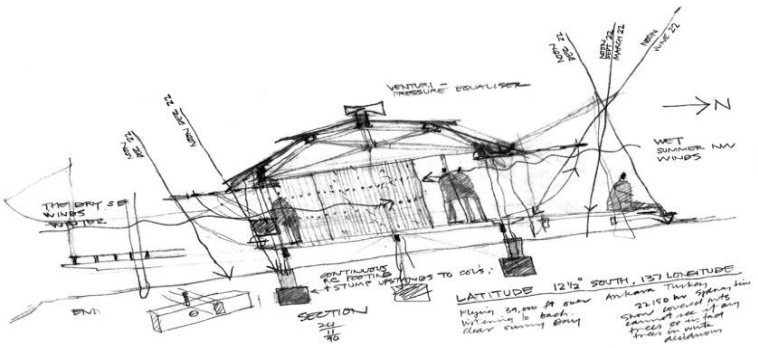


Figure 7 Section Sketch Marika – Alderton House 1994

Principle 4: Rectangular Plan

Using a Rectangular Floor Plan

This principle is a simple yet effective method for conveying the concept introduced in Principle 3—an integrated system uniquely crafted for its site. The rectangular plan allows the building's functions to remain flexible and adaptable to the needs of its occupants while still accommodating the site's spatial and environmental strategies.

The rectangular floor plan offers several advantages:

1. It preserves the integrity of the environmental system devised to harmonize with nature, allowing it to extend consistently throughout the entire building. The conceptual framework established in the design is applied across all functional areas.

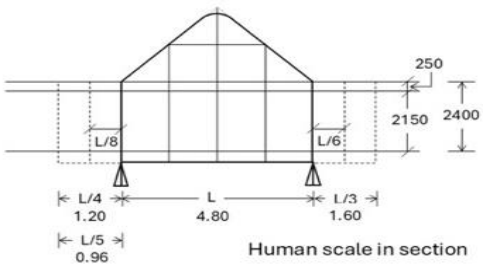


Figure 8 Human scale in section

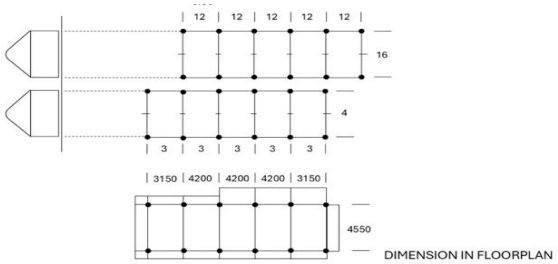


Figure 9 Dimension in floorplan

2. It is suited to the concept of Human Scale, providing dimensions that are appropriate for vertical living. The proportions of width, length, and height on the building's elevation are controlled in relation to human scale, creating a friendly spatial perception. This allows the occupants to feel connected to the earth, reflected through the use of horizontal lines that run smoothly along the ground when viewed from the building's longitudinal side.

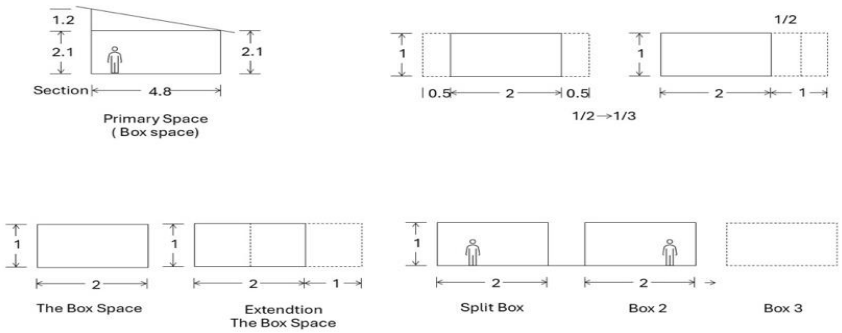


Figure 10 illustrates the proportions and dimensions that are appropriately scaled for vertical living.

3. The floor plan is flexible and can be expanded or contracted following a linear plan approach. Using a grid system, the usable space can be increased or reduced according to the building's functional requirements and various program needs.

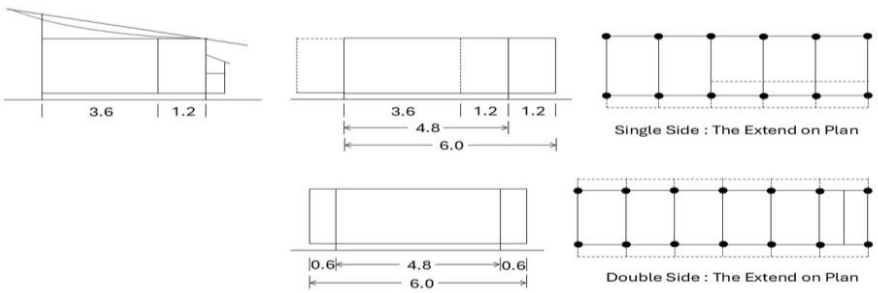


Figure 11 illustrates how the usable space can be expanded or reduced to meet the building's spatial requirements.

4. The design allows for "growth," enabling additional massing to be added. Because the key proportions and dimensions are controlled by the sectional profile and the rectangular floor plan, the layout can be scaled up to a larger configuration as a cluster plan. This approach supports the aggregation of multiple units into clusters, making the concept adaptable to buildings of all sizes—small, medium, or large. It can be applied to everything from residential houses to large public buildings while still preserving the core idea of integrating the building with the earth and nature, which is the main conceptual framework.

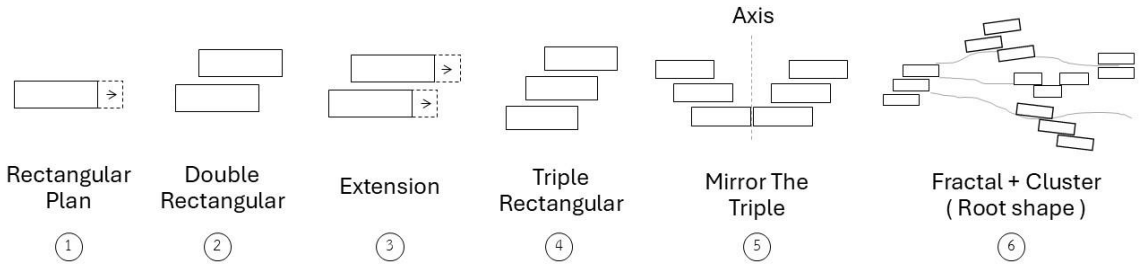


Figure 12 shows the various types and methods of arranging rectangular floor plans.

5. The design incorporates a Modular System, an architectural approach that enables components to be prefabricated in a factory. This system minimizes material waste through carefully considered modular dimensions and proportions, and it supports dry construction methods that allow for faster installation with minimal leftover materials. As a result, resource consumption is reduced while maximizing functional efficiency and sustainability.

Principle No. 5: Tectonic = Craft with Nature Details

The architectural composition is formed through the integration of the Four Elements of Architecture, in which each architectural element interacts with natural forces. These relationships can be observed through details that respond to and accommodate nature:

1. Rainwater collection, integrated with the Roof Element (Overhead Plane)
2. Ventilation and wind control, integrated with the Wall Element (Vertical Plane)
3. Allowing water to pass through, integrated with the Ground / Earthwork Element (Base Plane)
4. Creating warmth, integrated with the Fireplace Element (Heart of the House)
5. Changing floor levels, integrated with the Stair Element (Change of Level)

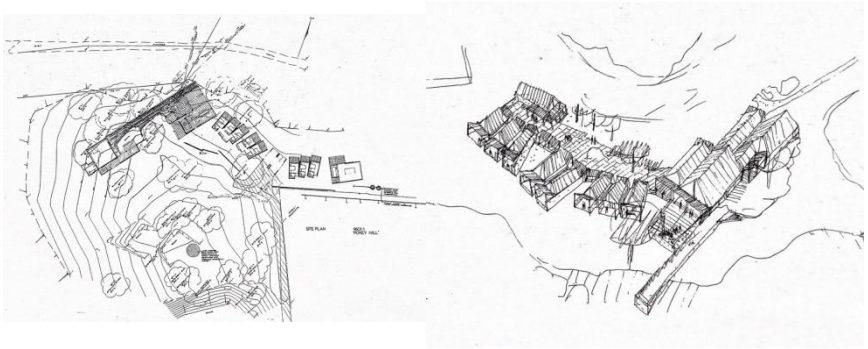


Figure 13 Sketch Macro Scale House at Mouth White by Glenn Murcutt

When considering lines and forms at three different scales, the coherence between architectural composition and natural elements becomes evident:

1. **Macro Scale** – At the level of the site plan, land plot, and sectional relationship to the terrain, a wider viewpoint reveals how the building's form harmonizes with its surrounding context and landscape.
2. **Middle Scale** – At the architectural and building scale, the spatial relationships become visible through the interaction between interior and exterior spaces, section configurations, sunlight angles, shading, wind flow, and contact with the ground.

3. **Micro Scale** – At the detail level, the observation focuses on specific architectural components and craftsmanship, such as gutter details, window edges, angled glazing, adjustable louvers, and chamfered structural steel elements, all of which express the fine-grain relationship between the building and natural forces.

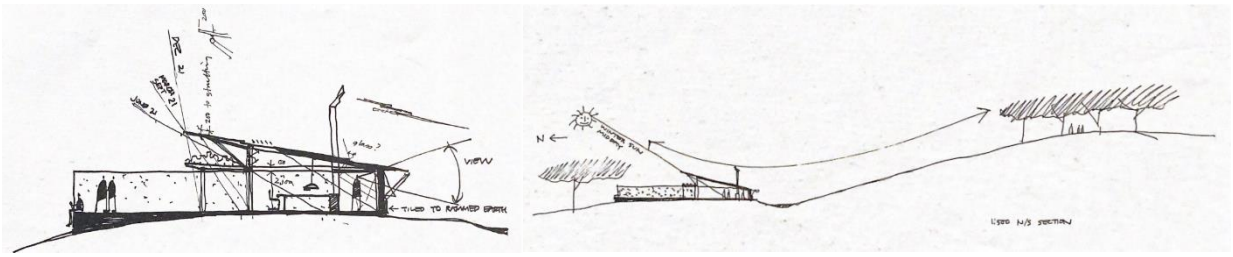


Figure 14 Sketch Middle Scale and Micro Scale by Glenn Murcutt

Murcutt's architectural assembly methods therefore reveal a strong connection to the site context across all three scales.

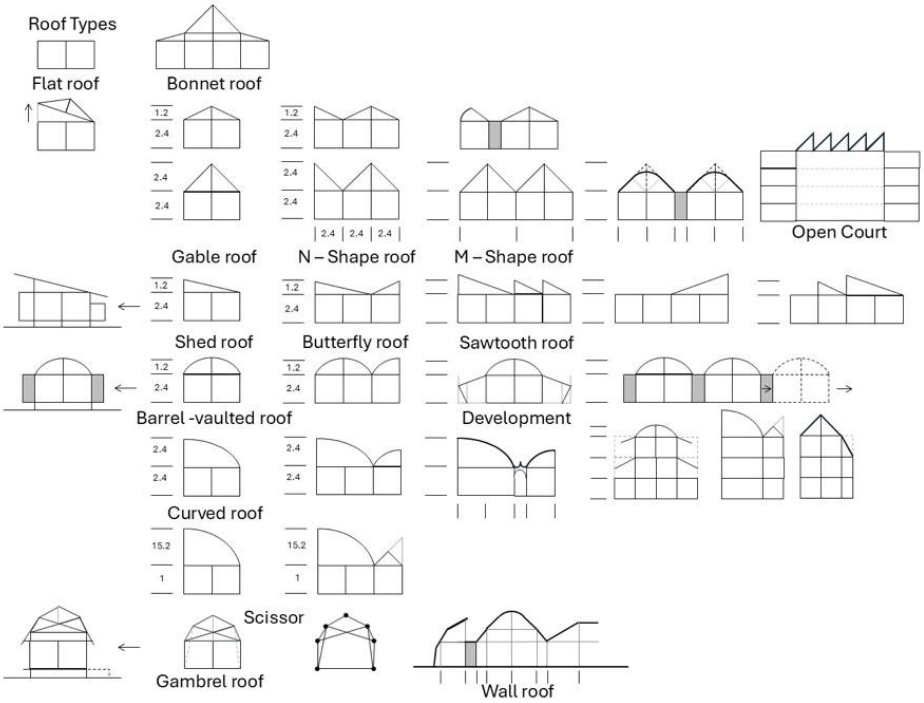


Figure 15: Works and architectural design characteristics of Glenn Murcutt

Principle No. 6: Spirit of Lightly — The Essence of Lightness

Lightness is regarded as a fundamental purpose of life—a pursuit of wisdom rooted in the traditional knowledge of the Aboriginal people. It represents the harmonious blending of ancient philosophies with contemporary methods and technologies. Murcutt emphasizes that this concept is not merely about creating buildings in the style of modern *Green Design* or *Sustainable Design*, but rather about honoring the spirit of the earth with humility—Humble Living.

This "lightness" can be understood in two dimensions:

1. ***Tangible Lightly*** – the visible and physically perceptible form of lightness, expressed through architectural objects and material presence.
2. ***Intangible Lightly*** – the invisible, intangible form of lightness, rooted in subjective experience, such as the ego "I", identity, love, compassion, sense of place, and the act of caring and preservation.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

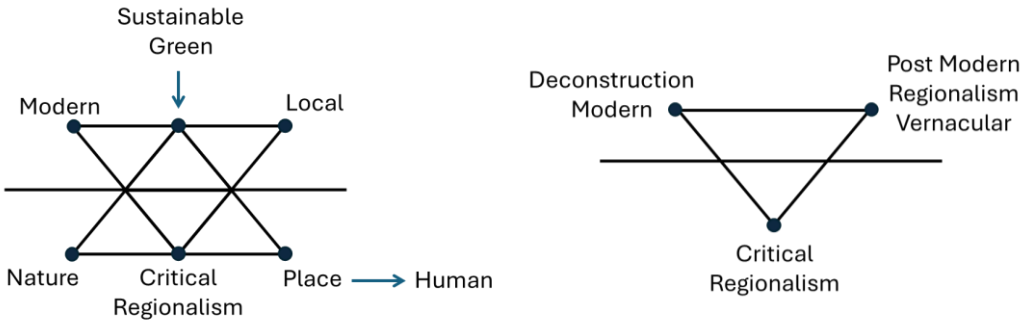


Figure 16: Classification and grouping of architectural theories and concepts

In classifying and grouping architectural theories and conceptual frameworks, the first issue relevant to this study concerns the ideological conflict within modern architecture after World War II, specifically 1946–1964. This was an era of searching for and proposing new modes of habitation for societies rebuilding their cities after wartime devastation. The theoretical influence during this period can be traced back to the First Industrial Revolution (1760–1825), which transformed agrarian society into an industrial one, thereby reshaping cities and housing typologies. This continued through the Second Industrial Revolution (1870–1914), during which World War I emerged.

The Principal Debates in Architectural Theory Include:

1. ***Modern Architecture (International Style)***
   Modern Architecture promoted building forms that could be mass-produced in factories and erected anywhere—Placelessness—to support the new modes of urban living in the post-war period (1946–1964). It celebrated new materials and construction methods, emphasizing innovation that produced visual contrast and new identities within cities.
2. ***Architecture Without Architects (1964) by Bernard Rudofsky***
   Rudofsky's work stimulated interest in architecture rooted in place and locality. It foregrounded ecological relationships, ways of living, and cultural continuity derived from folk wisdom. This perspective informed the rise of Postmodern architecture and contemporary interpretations of Vernacular Architecture, which sought to express local identity, often through symbolic manifestations of nationalism or regionalism. It emphasized the beauty of coexistence and harmony with place.
3. ***Critical Regionalism (1981)***
   Critical Regionalism was introduced by Alexander Tzonis & Liane Lefaivre and further developed by Kenneth Frampton in *Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*. The theory proposed an architectural direction positioned between global modernism and vernacular traditions—between Placelessness and Place. Frampton's work highlighted several architects, including Glenn Murcutt, as exemplars of this theoretical position.

Frampton's Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance:

1. Acknowledge culture and civilization; consider context
2. Recognize the rise and fall of avant-garde movements
3. Relate critical regionalism to world culture
4. Respect the resistance of place-form
5. Merge culture and nature
6. Involve all senses

Compared with:

Six Principles of Glenn Murcutt's Architecture

1. Deep Listening to the Site
2. Dwelling with Nature
3. Creating a System Between Architecture and Nature Through The Cross Section
4. Rectangular Planning System
5. Tectonic = Craft with Nature Details
6. Spirit of Lightly

When focusing specifically on Glenn Murcutt's concepts and methods, several observations emerge:

1. His work attempts to merge culture and nature, yet the emphasis lies more on harmonizing natural elements with the basic elements of architecture rather than expressing cultural symbolism. It is a relationship between natural forces and architectural fundamentals.
2. Sensory perception and tactile experience play a central role. Murcutt studies Aboriginal ways of living with nature and adopts an intuitive, sensory-driven design process—from conceptual thinking to freehand sketching, followed by hand-drawn construction documents and tectonic construction methods.
3. He proposes a *System of Dwelling within Nature*, not Regionalism. His work does not attempt to reproduce local forms or express regional identity. Instead, each design is generated anew from the conditions of the site—sun, wind, landscape, microclimate. His architecture avoids replication, unlike many forms of Vernacular or Contemporary architecture that reinterpret traditional shapes. His objective is balance with nature, not national or regional representation.
4. Murcutt does not emphasize regionalism or nationalism. For him, the primary concern is the Earth itself. Architecture, he argues, should not be constrained by national borders but shaped by geography and climate. This explains why he refuses to design buildings outside Australia—he does not claim an intimate understanding of other climates. Instead, he contributes by teaching internationally, encouraging local architects to design based on their own environments.
5. He engages deeply with modernist principles—simplicity, clarity of form, technological innovation—but adapts them sensitively to the Australian landscape. Natural elements guide modifications in tectonics and form, producing architecture that evolves from its environmental context.
6. His unique method, "Deep Listening to the Site," involves observing context through what he describes as slicing the site like an onion—both horizontally and vertically—into multiple cutting lines. This analytical technique becomes the starting point for developing architectural systems that integrate harmoniously with the site.

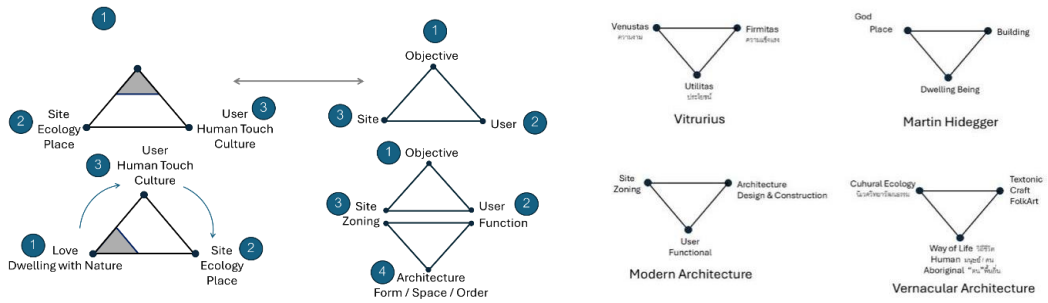


Figure 17: Diagram illustrating the synthesis of architectural design principles and theories

In summary, regarding the central question of this research, Murcutt's work can be situated within the framework of Critical Regionalism. However, his approach is far more distinctive. Murcutt prioritizes nature—that is, the earth itself—rather than defining regions through notions of nationhood, nationalism, regional identity, or locality. His architecture does not impose upon the land; it embodies a way of building that is gentle, non-intrusive, and deeply respectful of the natural world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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