

THE SOCIAL CHALLENGE TO MODERN ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

THE AGA KHAN AWARD FOR ARCHITECTURE

IN THE SPIRIT OF ISLAM

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It is with a deep sense of humility and considerable trepidation that I stand here before you. I am not an architect, nor am I an expert on Islamic art and architecture. I have in the last few years merely been engaged in social planning problems. It is really only my awareness that architecture is not just the creation of architects, but the product of interaction between architects and clients, and between common people and their cultural tradition and its environment, and the problems, the aspirations, and expectations of the future that pervade a society at any given time, which has given me the courage to accept the invitation of His Highness the Aga Khan to share with you some reflections on the social challenge to modern Islamic architecture, triggered by my involvement as a member of the Master Jury.

Meeting in these beautiful and historic surroundings, it is unfortunately, impossible not to be acutely aware of the sounds of war close by and the cries of human suffering. It forcefully reminds us of the extent to which we are part of, and affected by the very profound changes which are now taking place in the patterns of the global distribution of power and the continuing fragmentation of worldwide and regional alignments resulting from the projection of heightened economic and political competition on different parts of the world in a situation of nuclear stalemate. Its impact on an increasingly malfunctioning international economic system is further aggravated by the fears engendered by the inevitable vulnerabilities of all societies, large and small, strong and weak, in this increasingly crowded interdependent, complex and fragile world of ours.

We are equally affected by the very profound and continuing social changes resulting from changing value perceptions and aspirations of people in both the industrial and the developing world - as distinct from governments - like the environmental movement, the human rights, the women's and the peace movements. These are all manifestations of that almost autonomous process that began with the liberation movements of the third world towards national independence after World War II.

* The opinions expressed in this address are the author's personal ones; they do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations University.

In addition there are also the processes of internal fragmentation, resulting from profound and rapid social and psychological change affecting aspirations and behavior of people and groups of people, hitherto socially and politically ineffective, at the bottom of our societies in both the industrial and the developing world, upsetting existing social and sometimes even political balances.

It is, however, also possible to sense, through the din of war, the agonies of conflict even among ourselves, and the swirling cross-currents of change, the search for new patterns of purpose and cohesiveness reversing earlier processes of stagnation and decay, and for the social and political arrangements that make this possible, and to observe a new assertiveness of cultures which had for a long period been marginalized and powerless. This includes the struggle to overcome the structural imbalance in the world economic system, but also what is now often called the resurgence of Islam in its various forms. Indeed, we may be at the painful beginnings of a possibly long historical process leading to the re-emergence of a modern Islamic civilisation, together with other non-Western civilisations taking their rightful place side-by-side with Western industrial civilisation on the basis of equality in a pluralistic world.

And while we all pray for the early restoration of peace and justice, the occasion of the Aga Khan Award is both a manifestation of the need to continue the works for peace even as war erupts and threatens to engulf us, as well as a manifestation of the powerful impulses for self-renewal of the cultures of Islam.

Whether these impulses will be able to carry us through such a process of self-renewal from within our own societies and out of the deep crisis in which we find ourselves will, to a large extent, depend on whether the cultures of Islam will be capable of giving an effective Islamic response to the problems of massive endemic poverty, large and rapidly increasing populations and inequitable social structures, besetting our societies. This in turn will depend not on whether Islamic culture can adjust to the dynamics of science and technology, but rather on whether our cultures will be able to harness, redirect and develop science and technology to meet the needs of our own cultures for modernisation and self-renewal within the context of the transcendental conception of life that is the essence of Islamic culture.

Seen from this perspective, it is quite likely that the patterns of development and the trajectory of industrialisation in those low-income Islamic countries with large, rapidly increasing populations, will be different from those of the industrialised nations of the West. The necessity to develop our countries from a broad social basis, rather than through the expansion of the modern sectors of former colonial or dependent societies, and to involve large populations in a dynamic revitalisation of the country-side where most of the people live, as well as the crowded informal sectors of the urban centers, is bound to lead to different patterns of spatial organisation, different urban-rural configurations, and different transportation flows. These human settlement requirements reinforced by the high cost of energy, pose new architectural problems to the solution which may well influence the physical shape, quality and style of modern Islamic civilisation.

We are all very much aware that we are the inheritors of a great architectural tradition, reflecting in the variety of its architectural idioms, the richness and grandeur of past Islamic civilisation.

At the same time, we are also fully aware that we can no longer automatically draw from that tradition in our efforts to respond to these new challenges and new needs, because of the sharp and traumatic discontinuities which characterize our recent past and our present situation. We are, in fact, just beginning to find ourselves after the collapse of colonial rule and foreign domination with their own infusion of architectural styles into the traditions of our societies.

As in all cultures recovering from foreign domination, the alienation from one's own cultural identity has been accompanied by a considerable loss of style and taste, which is reflected in the architectural features of our primate cities, and which, after independence, was only further aggravated by the stylistic confusion of modern cosmopolitan architecture. This is one reason why we will not be able creatively to draw from our great cultural heritage until Islamic culture has recaptured its essential core and authenticity once again, and as a result its confidence in itself.

There is a second reason why we cannot do so. The nature, the scale and the urgency of the social "problematique" in which we now find ourselves, is so different from anything in the history of Islamic civilisation, while at the same time our own value perceptions have become quite different, that it suggests the likelihood that modern Islamic architecture may have to pose to itself anew the most elementary questions with regard to its place in the definition of architectural needs, relating quantity, volume, cost, quality and content to the problems of poverty and demography and justice, as well as its function and its role in design and conception, before it can begin to discover the possibly new relevance to our present and future needs hidden in the architectural richness of our past.

These reflections suggest two outcomes.

One is, that the responses to the extremely varied social, economic political and ecological conditions and the different cultural and architectural history in the many nations of Islam, may lead to an even greater variety of architectural expression. In that case, the future of Islamic civilisation and the characteristics of new Islamic architectural styles is, in light of the demographic distribution, just as likely to be determined by the hundreds of millions of Muslims in Asia and Africa with their own architectural traditions, with often strong pre-Islamic roots, as by those in the Middle Eastern and Arab world.

Secondly, it seems rather unlikely that a new Islamic architectural style will develop from adaptations of modern cosmopolitan architecture or from adaptations of Islamic monumental tradition.

Inevitably, such buildings will continue to be built, but at the same time Islamic architectural self-renewal may more likely come from the wrestling of architects, city and national planners, and of our societies as a whole, including the poor themselves with the problems of housing the poor and the many. It is here that the vernacular Islamic tradition may turn out to be of more direct relevance.

Leaving these speculations aside for the moment, no architect working in the Islamic world can afford to ignore these considerations. He cannot afford to think only in terms of single buildings or complexes. Except in a few cases, he will have to think of the totality of the human environment and within the resource constraints prevailing in low-income countries, suffering from the impact of high energy costs. He will have to work with urban and national planners in the context of a general search for alternative energy conserving development strategies and spatial organisation of human activities.

He will have to aim at helping to develop urban communities built with materials, building and climate control-methods that are not energy-intensive, and at settlement patterns that bring housing, employment place, commercial and production centers within walkable distances and on a human scale around the centers of worship which in the past have so much determined the rhythm of life in Islamic cities.

The challenges facing the architect in Islamic countries also stem from the rapid increase in population. He cannot but realize that during the lifetime of the major buildings and complexes he will design, the population of the country in which he works may double, with many consequences for his buildings and complexes.

In addition, his architectural response to the needs of housing the poor will have to fit into the growing realisation that poverty cannot be overcome merely by the provision of services and assistance to the poor and the socially weak, but only by their own active and voluntary participation in utilizing the means provided to them, as well as by the enhancement of their social effectiveness through self organisation and self management. If Barbara Ward's observation is correct as I believe it is, that very few housing projects for the poor have really been utilized by the poor, and that it might not be possible for one class of society to build houses for another class lower down on the social ladder, then the role of the architect in our Islamic societies, as well as his training will require considerable redefinition.

His training then should also sensitize him to the implications of the fact that most of the poor, and most of the people in his society, live in the country-side, and that their development needs and efforts in a situation of high energy cost and rapid population increase pose new problems asking for architectural solutions as well. Very few of the University trained architects in the Third World have cared to address these problems. Neither have they, generally speaking, cared to involve themselves in the search by the poor for architecturally more satisfactory solutions, to the shelters, dwellings and

improvements they have built for themselves in their new or old urban settlements. Study service programmes for architecture students aiming at working with the urban and rural poor like similar programmes in development assistance or legal-aid, might be one step in that direction.

The poor, large, densely packed, rapidly increasing populations and their housing needs in high energy cost situations are not the only social challenges which modern Islamic architecture will have to face as we move into the twenty-first century. Profound and often rapid shifts in perceptions of values, some of which I have referred to earlier, are taking place which are bound to affect the demands put on architects and architecture in Islamic countries. I will mention only a few examples. The concept of interiority for instance, which has been so characteristic of traditional Middle Eastern architecture, is bound to be affected by changing lifestyles, by changes in the role of women, and also by changing perceptions and needs that govern the balance between the commercial, professional, and organised public activities and the non-commercial community and family oriented, status and culture enhancing activities in each of our societies. Modern communications are in addition bound to have an impact on social mobility, on conceptions of privacy, accessibility and the architectural expression of the differentiation between exterior and interior space.

In responding to the massive needs for low-cost housing within the constraints of low-income economics and high energy costs, the architect as well as his client will have to address the question whether in the various cultures of Islam we want to break up the traditional extended three-generation family into nuclear, two-generation family. No architect or planner can ignore the profound social and cultural as well as economic consequences of that decision in terms of family stability, the care of the aged, the care of children and the disabled.

As to governmental architecture, the relationship between government and the governed in our countries is also in a process of profound change as a result of improved access to education, higher levels of political consciousness and increasing social effectiveness of large numbers of people emerging from traditional situations of powerlessness and passivity. Also the likelihood of population doubling, coupled with modern communications technology is bound to have an important impact on administrative, bureaucratic and political processes and structures, with significant consequences for the design, location and dispersal of government buildings as well as for their relationship to the public at large.

Likewise, no educational planner or architect in our Islamic countries could ignore the impact of modern communications technology on the design and location of the institutes of higher education. Electronic technology may soon make classrooms obsolete, may make dispersed learning possible and could leave universities primarily in the role of institutions devoted to the nurturing of scientific ethos and discipline as well as of critical judgement, through apprenticeship with the best scientific minds in the country. Such development would soon turn expensive university buildings, designed to house large numbers

of students at a safe distance from crowded population centers, into white elephants, even within the effective life of the buildings. Such a development might also reduce the danger that the physical and social isolation from society at large, reflected in the design and choice of site of such large university complexes, would produce either arrogant technocrats or narrow ideologists, both equally insensitive to, and ignorant of, the real problems of their society they are expected to be able to help solve.

Having made these few, primarily illustrative remarks on the social environment that will determine the functions to which Islamic urban and rural population centers should be able to respond, it is also important to state that these remarks and the possible architectural solutions to these problems are essential, but not necessarily sufficient, conditions for the development of a modern distinctly Islamic architectural style.

Looking at the great architectural styles in human history one comes to realize the extent to which great architecture has been the product of great faith, not that of a single individual, but of a whole society. That faith may be religious, as is the case with most historical styles, but it may also be secular as demonstrated by the works of the great modern western architects early in this century. Their style reflected the almost unlimited faith in man's capacity to shape his own environment and control his own destiny. Such secular faith has in recent decades been on the wane, and much of contemporary architecture is rather a reflection of superficial fashions or individual idiosyncracies of architect or client.

However, what we are now witnessing in many cultures all over the world is a resurgence of religiosity, which may be the beginning of what a noted sociologist has called the "return of the sacred".

It seems obvious that in our Islamic societies only a major resurgence of faith may eventually take the struggle for the right architectural solutions or responses to the massive and urgent social challenges of our times, poverty, population and injustice, to the level where a great new Islamic architectural style could gradually emerge.

This would put the architect close to the center of the traditional Islamic strivings for a just and moral society that is also democratic.

It is to an important extent his artistic and technical creativity and social responsibility, as well as the creative architectural processes he is capable of triggering among the so-called common people and the bureaucracy - at a higher level of religious awareness - that may trigger the articulation and physical image of Islam as a design for future living. In that process it can be hoped that the architecture that will be produced may become markers on the road to a new social and political spirituality that will be the heart of a revitalized, dynamic, modern Islamic civilisation.