

Note for the File

Rector Soedjatmoko's notes on the Editorial Advisory Committee Meeting of Mimar magazine in Paris on 8 April 1985.

The meeting was opened with a statement by The Aga Khan. He said that it was time to review the policies of Mimar in light of three problems. One is that in the three and a half years of its existence, Mimar had accumulated a loss of \$600,000. Secondly, that while the initial expected circulation was 30,000, it was later reduced to 12,000. The actual circulation, however, is no more than 4,000, even though that number is growing. Thirdly, the management and production machine seems to be fractured. There seems to be an ineffective structure. Also, the accounting system does not provide enough figures on which anticipatory projections could be developed that could be of some help to the management. In this connection, the commercial aspects needed to be reviewed also.

I then asked for the privilege of making a somewhat longer statement, because it was the first time that I had attended a committee meeting, having missed the two previous ones. I began by saying that in many ways Mimar was an admirable journal of which we all could be very proud. However, I thought that even more critical comments than those made by The Aga Khan were in order, because of the still unrealized potential significance of Mimar. I, therefore, believed that there was a need for a much more radical solution. Incremental improvements would not enable us to deal with the organizational weaknesses, nor with the problems of circulation and income. I said that I would speak on two different levels: first on the level of the present approach and situation. At the first level one could state the obvious, namely that the magazine was not responding to the challenge in its subtitle, which is Architecture in Development. While admirable examples of architectural design have been presented, their relationship to development has not come through. There have been a few attempts to deal with some development problems, but they remain rather alien elements within the context of the rest of the magazine. One should much more look systematically for design problems in development. But this raises some very disturbing questions. In many developing countries, the doctors have largely remained in the cities and are catering to the middle and upper class urban population, leaving largely

unattended, except by a proportionately small number of public health officials, the medical and health needs of the population at large. A similar question can be raised with regard to architects in Asia. They also flock to the large cities, serving the needs of the new urban elites, while some of the central problems of metropolitan and urban living already now, and even more so in the next century, are located in the slums, in the favellas and in the informal sectors of contemporary cities in the Third World. Have Asian architects no role to play in the efforts of slum dwellers to improve their housing facilities? This self-help in slum improvement is now the dominant philosophy after the earlier urge to build huge low-cost housing complexes in a number of countries, resulting in considerable social, economic and cultural dislocation. At least the lawyers in Third World countries, who also tend to remain in the cities, have established legal aid stations and services extending their reach among the poor and into the countryside. Is there no such role to be played, and no such contribution to be made by Asian architects? That is one of the burning questions it seems to me, and the magazine does not address these questions. It should, in my view, be possible to direct the content of the magazine more towards development without reducing the emphasis on design and high quality presentation. It might help shape the ethical orientation and social responsibility of a new generation of architects and help develop the tastes, style and standards of the potential clientele of such a new generation of architects.

Another problem is the inevitable process of the urbanization of the countryside itself. Through population doubling, present day villages are soon bound to reach levels of concentration in Asia which will require urban infrastructures and facilities. What are the architectural problems involved in that process which will have to be addressed. Who will address them? With regard to the primate cities, it is very obvious that the Third World is already beginning to reach a very critical stage in its capacity to manage such high urban concentrations at such low levels of income and high levels of unemployment. The rising urban criminality rate in many primate cities already has led to counter measures by the authorities that violate human rights, to say the least.

There is another set of questions that has to do with readership and distribution. The readers obviously are successful, upper middle class, most likely architects and other professional people. The conclusion can be drawn that younger architects and libraries in the poorer developing countries do not have the resources to subscribe to Mimar, and this is one

of the reasons why the circulation has remained so limited.

Who are the potential readers? What is the potential market of Mimar in its present format? It is the architects, the professional class, and the emerging middle class in many developing countries. But frankly I don't believe that Mimar is reaching them. I am also extremely sceptical about the capacity of MIT Press to penetrate those markets. I am quite convinced that it is not possible for any organization established on the Eastern seaboard of the United States to penetrate the markets in India, in Indonesia, in Malaysia, and in many of the countries of the Middle East. The figures indicate that the markets are there, but they will have to be reached from inside these cultures, not from the outside. Knowing that MIT Press is working through sales points that have been suggested and selected by Mimar itself, it is obvious that MIT Press is getting more out of this relationship than Mimar. In the end the proper organizational and accounting procedures that Mimar hopes to get through the MIT Press can be acquired more directly at less cost to Mimar. I am quite sure that MIT Press is effective in reaching a potential audience in the First World, although from the figures I have the feeling that the European market has not been seriously covered. Still there is no reason why MIT Press could not do that. My scepticism has to do with its capacity to penetrate markets in the Third World.

Let me now make a few comments on what I consider a deeper level of questioning of the correctness of Mimar's positioning and role in what we hope to be the revitalization of Islamic civilization and its self-renewal. We are all aware of the great churning that runs through the whole of the Muslim world. We are all aware of the tremendous force of the Islamic resurgence and the great variety of its forms and its dynamics. How eventually all of these often contradictory pulls and pushes will give shape to new forms of modern Islamic cultures remains to be seen, but it is bound to be a long and painful process and we will have to think not in terms of decades, but in terms of half a century or more. Many of the issues that are now in contention may turn out to be false or temporary issues, however powerful the forces that focus on such problems now seem to be. We seem to be engaged in a violent struggle between the fourteenth and the twenty-first centuries. Underlying this conflict is the question of the restructuring of societies to try to make them more consonant with one's religious precepts. We of course are also aware that processes of this kind are taking place in many other cultures and societies that are rooted in other world religions. All world religions are at present involved in the search for proper or adequate responses to the human predicament in modern society.

The real issue it seems to me is not one of trying to make life and society conform to religious precepts, but to infuse society with a new sense of spirituality and an awareness of the transcendental significance of the ultimate meaning of life.

Who are the agents in this so far chaotic process that may either be the manifestation of a tremendous crisis, or the beginning of a process of self-renewal in Islamic civilization? These agents are certainly not the present elite. They may be among the newly emerging middle and lower middle class. They may be present among the religious segments of traditional society. The question I want to pose is, does Mimar reach these potential agents of change? Is it making an effort to reach them, and to interact with them as they grope for new social concepts, lifestyles, and political arrangements? I certainly don't believe so. Should we make that effort? I would say yes, in the long run, we should, if we want Mimar, which is a splendid magazine, not to be an ephemeral phenomenon; in the light of history a splendid, but essentially marginal manifestation of prevailing tastes among an elite that is passing away. To put it another way, I don't believe that simply by spreading notions of beauty in design we will be able to influence the shaping of the esthetic and architectural criteria of a rejuvenated Islamic civilization.

The beauty and placidity of Mimar is a far cry from the agony and the tearing up of the fabric of society in many places of the Islamic world. In that sense, Mimar is much too sanitized a version to be seen as an honest reflection of the search and the pain that now are part of Islamic life in the contemporary world.

In making these points I am not trying to imply that there should be a radical change in the format of Mimar or in the thrust of the marketing effort. I am trying to look at Mimar in a slightly longer historical perspective, which does open up a potential role for Mimar of much greater significance than Mimar is playing and could be playing within the present format. I am making these comments primarily for reflections about future directions over the longer term.

One final question needs to be addressed: Mimar does not present itself self-consciously as a magazine for the Islamic world. Still the

question that inevitably comes up is, should Mimar limit itself to architectural design problems and manifestations in the Islamic world or not? Should Mimar not deal with the architectural expressions in cultures shaped by other religions? I firmly believe the latter. I firmly believe that Mimar should pay a great deal more attention to the architectural products of other cultures. It will only enrich the search within the Islamic world. It will enlarge the range of options and possible experimentations. It will stimulate the creative imagination among Moslem architects, designers and their clientele. Equally important is the fact that Islamic civilization, be it in its traditional form or in its rejuvenated form, will have to live in close proximity with other religions and cultures in a world that is inevitably very pluralistic. Unless this sensibility and capacity to find solutions for living in a crowded, culturally and religiously pluralistic world, are not developed through an early exposure to these cultural varieties, the Islamic rejuvenation may not succeed in establishing those forms and arrangements that will enable it to retain its vigour in the mosaic of cultures that will constitute the world of tomorrow.

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