

Pathways: The Search for Form

Architecture in Islam: The Search for Form

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This brief talk is an excursion in thought to correspond with the geographic and topical excursion of our previous four seminars. From an initial seminar which opened up the topic of Islamic architecture we went to Istanbul for a discussion of conservation, to Jakarta for housing, to Fez for symbolism, and finally here, to Amman, for "The Search for Form: Places of Public Gathering in Islam." For the purposes of this introduction (and somewhat accidentally) I speak as an occidentally-trained architect and educator with responsibilities for the architectural education of many from the Islamic world. Mr. Ardalán, who will present a position paper, speaks both orientally and occidentally—a distinct advantage. Had there been time, we might have heard the entire Award Steering Committee speak, for perceptions are plural and there is a great variety and richness of interpretation. My intent is to look back at the previous seminars. Mr. Ardalán will look forward, his own thinking reflected in three of his projects. He will set the stage for the case studies presented by some of our distinguished participants. At the end of the seminar we shall return to more general questions about Islamic architecture. We shall also hope to illuminate issues and suggest criteria by which the Aga Khan Award may be given.

At the first seminar we confronted what some have called "architectural outrage" in the Islamic world, and the domain in which to begin our search for appropriate architecture became clearer. Architecture could be seen as a sort of mediator of



Kashan, Iran: fountain in the Bāgh-i-fin courtyard

Photo. R. Holod

Islam—as *idea*, as *society* and as *symbol*. Together these represent some of the most important themes in the relationship between architecture and culture. The next three seminars recapitulated these themes in different ways with their successive emphases on conservation, housing and symbolism.

Islam as *idea* suggested principles which could guide the architectural hand and

mind. Geometry—the cosmos revealed—could take architectural form, and the sense of the interior would be emphasized. Equality would prohibit dominance of single elements, would guarantee every man a place and would suggest symmetry and repetition as governing principles. Surface treatment would dematerialize buildings through decoration and the denial of icon and idol. Continuity would prevent the unhelpful Western distinction between net and gross, or between “use” and circulation spaces. Privacy would require separation, articulation and differentiation of areas and passages. Axial visual access could be selectively admitted or

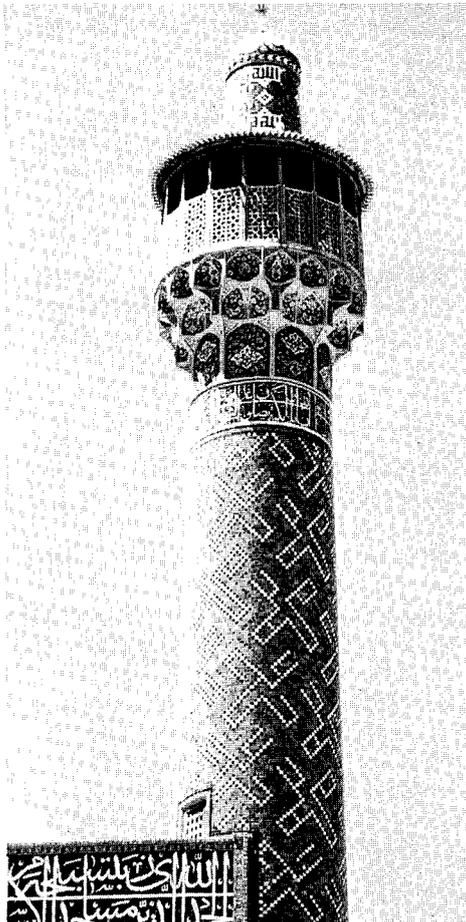
denied, and integration with nature would be required.

Islam as *society* suggested that architecture provide a field for actual and potential action. Insofar as people were poor, architecture should support their strivings, however modest their means. Insofar as the place of women was changing, architecture should facilitate that change. Insofar as the faith required prayer, architecture should make that possible.

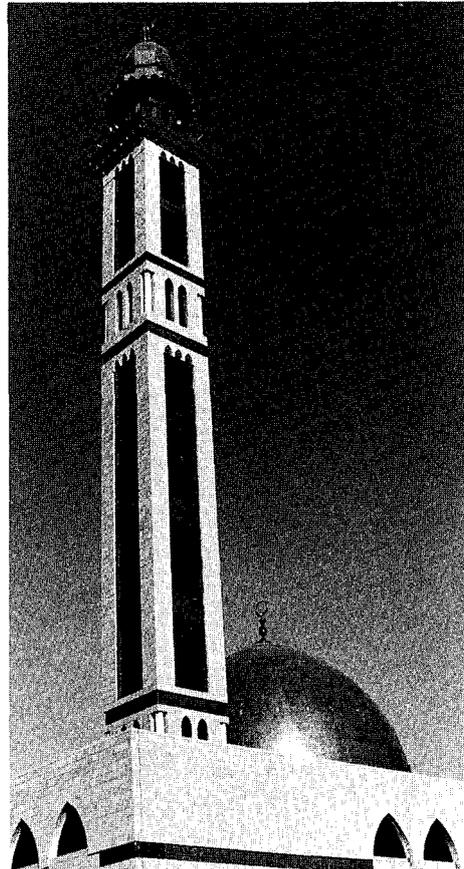
To show architecture as a field for action, housing proved an especially provocative subject. The kampong projects in Jakarta were visually modest. With energies gen-

erated largely from within the kampongs themselves, aid was solicited from the government and the World Bank for community improvement. A system of administrative and development guidelines was worked out to permit environmental improvements. It is this system of rules which governs the relationship of people to their environment. While it is crude now, it has the potential to be modified and improved to take account of much more subtle factors than simply the improvement of the footpaths and waste disposal systems.

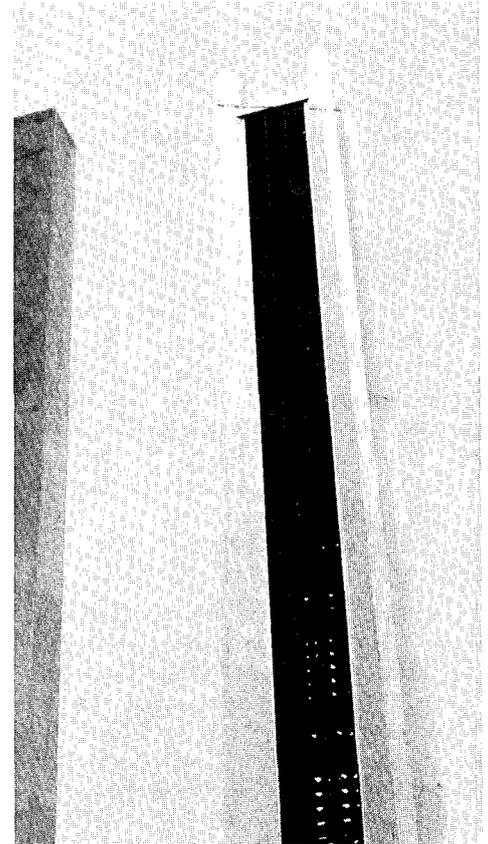
In housing areas where there are people of modest means, architectural intervention is



Isfahan, Iran: minaret of the Masjid-i Shah
Photo V Prentice



Amman, Jordan: minaret of the Jordan University Mosque. Architect Attalah Doany. Completed 1980
Photo: A Doany



Bandung, Indonesia: minaret of the “Salman” Mosque on the Institute of Technology campus. Architect: Achmad Noe'man Commissioned 1959, in use 1972
Photo: A Sadali

better governed by regulations and technical assistance than by specific physical forms. But can regulation be specific enough to deal with both the qualitative aspects of the environment and its practical arrangements? Can regulation facilitate subtle as well as necessarily crude environmental adaptation? And can regulation permit the achievement of that great prize: identity with and in the world?

Islam as *symbol* suggested that architecture could make assertions about relationships among people in time and space. Important distinctions should be understood here. Asserting the imperial past through new and major complexes is very different from reusing the formal elements or properties of historical complexes. Asserting the vernacular past as a contemporary solution to housing, in order to express nostalgia or dictate the distribution of power in a society, is very different from attempting to find a new and appropriate order in modest and locale-specific ways of building. Asserting an architectural vocabulary known primarily to a professional elite, and which extends a conversation carried on by them while having little or nothing to do with those who use or experience the building, is very different from a search for form which can serve as a vehicle for architectural learning and self-discovery. The exportation of architectural types valid for one group, to areas where such types are climatically wrong or stylistically inappropriate, is very different from using such architectural elements in ways well adapted to the locale and society.

Where does the search for modern form begin? To take one example, water has always been a vital part of life. How can architects transform its life-giving essence in ways that match the extraordinary treatment it received in Kashan? Is the search for form authentic, or even evident, in a Polynesian-style village of shops for an international hotel? In the nearby arena? Or in their juxtaposition? Is there a modern minaret? Should the search be made in the heroic or in the apparently vernacular style? Do answers lie in the careful restoration of still-extant monu-

ments like Chehel Sotun, the Ali Qapu or the Masjid-i Shah? Will these efforts give rise to skilled craftsmen who will adorn modern buildings as they once adorned the buildings of the past? Are there ways to find robust reuses for existing buildings?

I think that careful conservation and the sensitive reuse of forms are absolutely crucial to the development of an Islamic architecture. Their role is not to symbolize Islam by themselves, but to receive evolutions of meaning, to nourish those evolutions from the roots of the past. Meaning is primarily a contemporary phenomenon, and cultural definitions must be constantly revised in the light of new experience or else meaning cannot be interpreted. One of the fascinating characteristics of architectural form is its ability to survive changes in meaning. Indeed, the forms that seem the strongest may be those most able to shed old meanings and carry new ones. The use of architectural form prece-

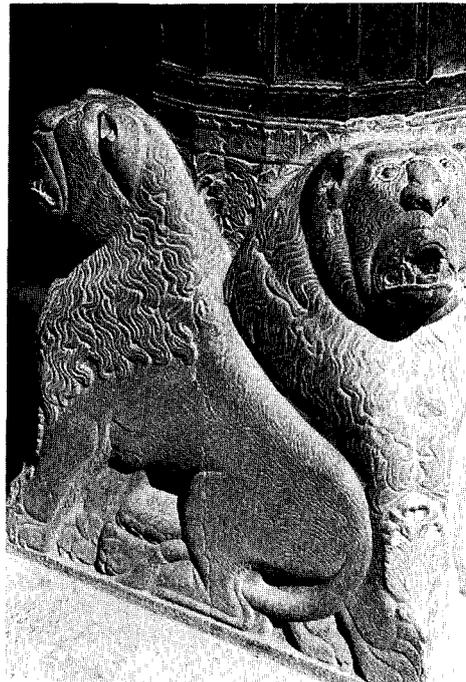
dents, therefore, need not imply a re-assertion of past values and meanings; it may instead reveal society's understanding of itself as a complex and intricate interpenetration of history and contemporary life.

The search for form in architecture is to some a lifelong quest. I believe that all of us here are part of that quest, one which binds us together from many parts of the world. In a recent speech at the Architectural League in New York, His Highness the Aga Khan said of architecture:

I can think of no human art form which exercises such a permanent influence over our lives. The architect can inspire us, overawe us, charm us, bring the immensity of space to bear upon us to underline our insignificance or, on the contrary, shrink space to a point where we become the pivotal figure in a restricted universe. This is indeed the exercise of power, a power which has a deep and permanent impact on every aspect of our lives, on our relations with each other and on our attitudes toward this world and the universe around us.

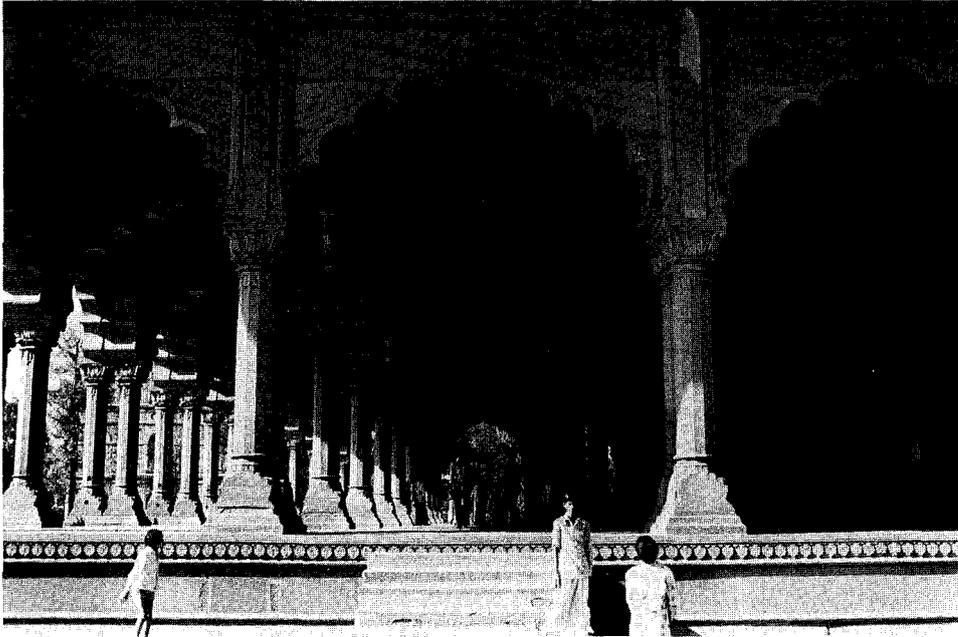
That power of the architect is mediated through society. Architects (and others who shape environments) set the conditions for use, for perception and for reflection which are necessary, though not sufficient, to create architectural form.

Form is a function of the individuals and groups in a society, as well as of its buildings. Form results from an individual's purpose, knowledge and familiarity with local circumstances, and from the interaction between the individual and the spaces in which his life is played out. One person's temple of love may be another's celebration of power and affluence. For some, the most important aspects of a place are what it might accommodate or become. For another, the same place may have a nostalgic rather than a practical aspect, because it reminds him of other regions in his experience or imagination. Tourists may not be aware of the dynamic qualities of an environment resulting from recent changes, or the subtly supportive qualities of a place which contains ele-



Isfahan, Iran: detail of the Chehel Sotun

Photo: W Porter



Delhi, India: the Red Fort

Photo: W. Porter

ments changing at different rates, providing stability and change at the same time. The habitué may “read” his or her city in terms of what is going on there, a perception accessible only through clues invisible to the newcomer who is dependent on more obvious visual features. Architects have been likened more to newcomers and tourists than to residents, because their actions often seem better for those who pass through than for those who would shape and enrich a way of life by being “of” a place.

For the contemporary world, significant form can enhance society’s practical nature by housing its activities appropriately. It can also facilitate the awareness and redefinition of culture, by providing eloquent vehicles for the communication of meaning and symbolic expression.

In foreign cultures the people may speak a language unknown to the architect; their ways of life and of doing business may be unfamiliar. The social philosophy of the

culture and that of the architect may differ substantially; they may not even be on the same team! Alienation seems increasingly to be institutionalized, as groups who conceive, design, finance, build and approve become more autonomous and distant from each other. We are sure to learn more about this issue in the course of the seminar, as persons from many sides of the table will be invited to present their views.

I have spoken of the force and character of Islamic architecture in its emergence as *idea*, as *society* and as *symbol*. I have discussed the search for form, the role of the architect and the difficulties imposed by cultural distance and fragmentation of the design process. We shall witness the search through the eyes of a number of architects, as communicated in their various case studies and presentations. We shall hear professionals speak of their understandings of the past, of other cultures and of the enduring values of architecture. Do these cases represent or

suggest what a contemporary Islamic architecture might be? Do they allow us to consider the most pressing social issues as well as the most challenging aesthetic problems of the day? Do they accommodate the interesting and complex scaffolding of thought and action required by those who would participate in these societies? These and many other questions are critical to our understanding of the search for form as it pertains to the theme of this seminar.