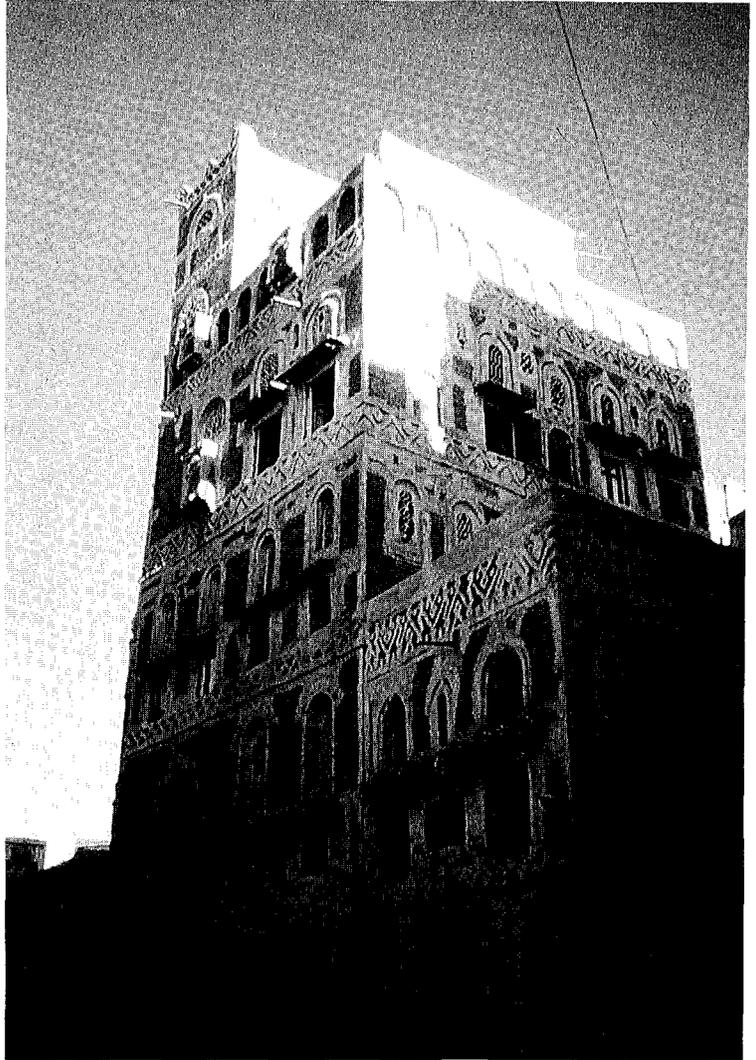
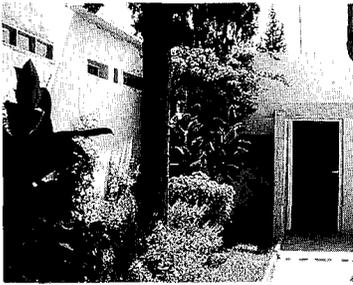


# The Architecture of Housing: A Survey of the Issues

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*Sana'a, historic high-rise structures that are precursors of today's tall buildings.*



Top: Courtyard houses in Agadir (1980 AKA Award winner) are a modern interpretation of a venerable tradition. Above: Mauritania, poor refugees cooperate on moving a house.

## Introduction

Housing is by far the most common form of building in the world and has, in many ways, received considerable attention from decision-makers, architects, planners and critics alike. Yet, in the Muslim world today, the debates around housing seem to have drifted into two domains that seldom meet:

- technical discussions about the problems of mass housing: land, services, credit, finance and urban planning.
- stylistic discussions of the cultural authenticity of individual structures, usually residences of the elite. While recognising the merits of each of these two questions, it behoves us to recognise that these are but small parts of the problem from an architectural point of view, and that we should seek to enrich architectural thinking by focusing *critically* on the *architecture* of housing in the Muslim world. This is distinct from the demographic, economic, social, political, financial and city-planning aspects of the problem. Without diminishing the relevance of these other dimensions, the unique contribution of this seminar should be in improving architectural criticism of architects' contributions in the domain of housing. To do so, we should start by asking a few fundamental questions:
  - The historic evolution of the building type: whether individual home for the wealthy or multi-family apartment structure, the precedent is there. It is also there from high-rise towers to low-rise courtyard designs. Yet discontinuities in space and time abound. Can one talk of building types, generic or time/space specific with any meaning in the Muslim world today?
  - Housing as the locus of interaction between the building, the individual and society: From Le Corbusier's "*La maison est une machine à habiter*" to Alexander and Hall's "Community and Privacy", to Marc's "Psychology of the House", the questions remain vital, challenging and acutely relevant. What are the differences between a "housing project" and a "community", and how do they interact? The sense of community that makes neighbours cooperate is independent of wealth and surroundings. One can find this even in the

poorest surroundings as when neighbours collaborate in moving a house in a Mauritanian refugee camp.

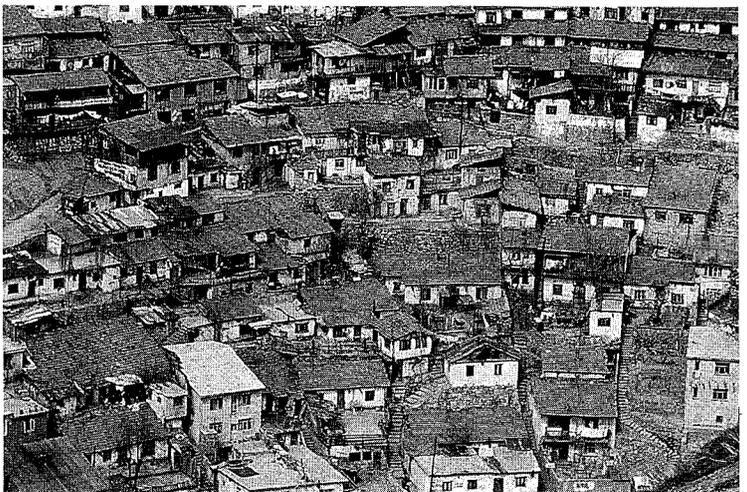
- Housing as medium of self expression: No other type of building affords as much opportunity for self expression. How is this fact being “read” and understood by different actors on the scene?

By addressing such questions, this seminar will try to take a thought-provoking, critical direction rather than a descriptive catalogue of problems and projects.

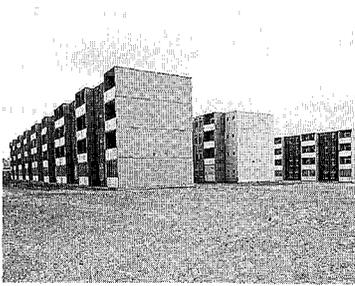
As a means of addressing these questions and taking into account the vastness of the material at hand, we propose to organise our discussion around a taxonomy of Housing as it exists, namely:

- Non architect-designed mass housing, usually spontaneous, self-help, or community built.
- Architect-designed, contractor-built mass housing.
- The individual, architect-designed, contractor-built home, usually for the rich and well to do.

The first two are the challenge of mass housing. The last has a unique niche in the array of architectural practice since it provides architects with some of the best vehicles both for artistic expression and for enriching society and culture as well as the vocabulary of world architecture.



*Organic quality of spontaneous settlements Gecekondu, Turkey.*



*Top: Bare geometry of repetitive slab blocks contrasts sharply with organic pattern of spontaneous settlements Yemen.*

*Above. Pervasive poverty raises questions about the relevance of monumental exemplars*

Let us now raise some issues about each of these in turn, hoping to return to each in the more detailed presentations of the subsequent sessions of the seminar.

### Spontaneous Settlements

The vast majority of the built environment is composed of spontaneous settlements, many of which are dismal slums with miserable and unsanitary conditions. Yet many of these settlements have also evoked the admiration of architects for their “organic” qualities. Indeed, one does frequently find a certain lively quality that contrasts sharply with the sterility of the bare geometry of repetitive slab blocks so characteristic of public housing everywhere. Why are we unable to combine the healthy, serviced environment with the individualised organic quality of the spontaneous settlements? Are these “organic” aesthetic qualities maintainable over time? These two questions can be restated as follows:

- Institutional, political and socio-economic issues  
Beyond the factors of economics, whether addressed by technology of materials or construction, or addressed by the skill of the master architect who innovates to create an aesthetically pleasing, humane environment that remains affordable to the poor, there are institutional, political and financial factors that impede the access of the poor to adequate housing. The issues are well-known. The solutions, also well-known, are tantamount to empowering the weak and disenfranchised members of society to take their destinies in their own hands. Some schemes of this type are AKAAs award winners. Why do they remain the exception rather than the rule?
- Aesthetics, poverty and change  
A fundamental problem in most of the Muslim world is that the exemplars that have defined the historical and cultural standard of aesthetics have usually been monumental and rich structures, while the pervasive reality of the Muslim people today — from Mauritania to Indonesia — is one of poverty. This conflict finds its resolution through the development of vernacular or popular modes of aesthetic

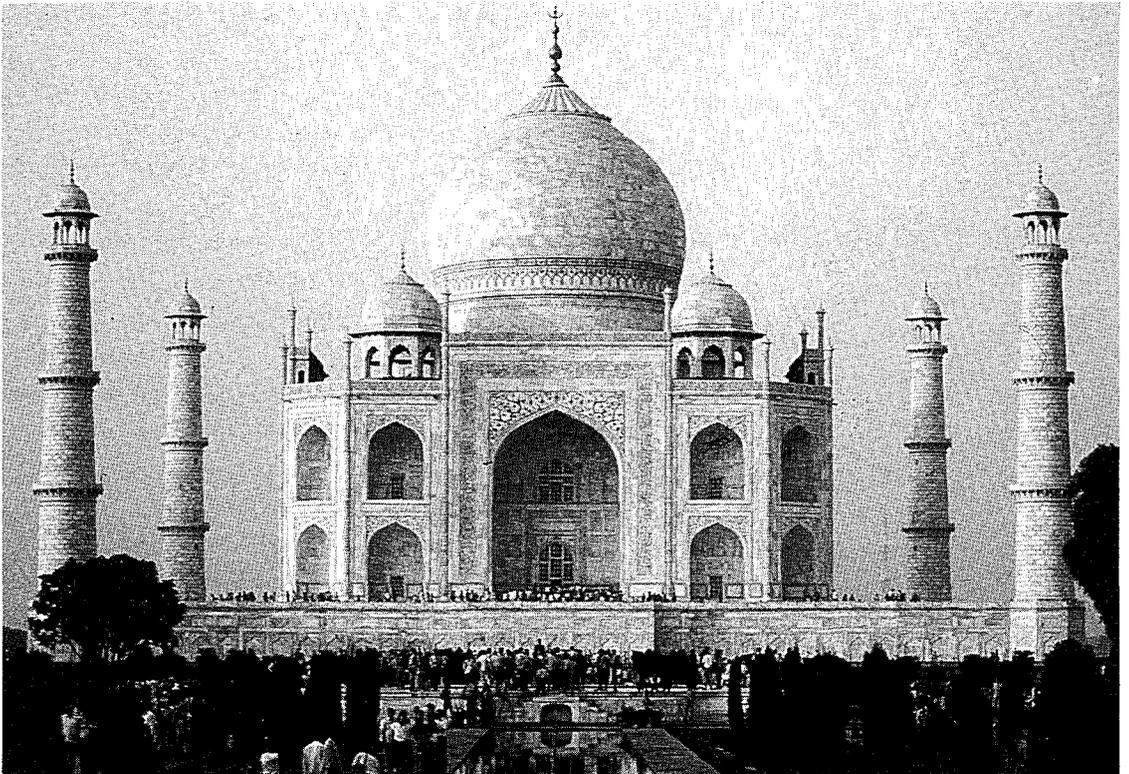
expression, some of which are remarkably ornate. How does this duality manifest itself in a time when demographic explosion, large-scale population movements and systematic cultural disorientation have contributed to the degradation of semiotic frameworks in the Muslim countries, where the historical rupture of Muslim societies makes it impossible to produce a coherent notion of cultural continuity?

The artist, the critic, the intellectual and the decision maker must all ponder these questions. Housing contributes as much as 65 per cent of the built-up areas in our cities today. And our cities are growing by 4-8 per cent per annum. The future of the built environment of Muslims, not only the quality of their shelter, is at stake.

*Monumental exemplars, such as the Taj Mahal, have served to define our notions of our cultural identity.*

### **Architect-designed, contractor-built mass housing**

By far the most complex and challenging issue in the domain of





*The ubiquitous slab block is the preferred solution of bureaucracies everywhere in East Africa.*

building today, the problems of mass housing can be looked at from many different angles. For purposes of this discussion, however, five specific issues deserve to be mentioned:

- The walk-up slab block as building type  
From the remotest deserts of Africa, to the frigid cold of Scandinavia, to the humid forests of South East Asia, the much deplored walk-up slab block seems to be the preferred solution of most decision makers at all times and in all places. The very ubiquitousness of the phenomenon, in the face of countless architectural and design critiques, deserves reflection. What does this say about architects' and critics' abilities to provide viable alternatives? Why are we unable to draw upon the vast reservoirs of present creativity and past legacies to supplant it? Should we try?
- The contributions of technology  
That technology of housing construction would one day provide the key to affordable housing for the masses of the poor needing shelter has been an elusive dream. Is it time to forego the pursuit of the technological solution to twenty-first century housing needs? Is it time to declare that "small is beautiful" and to enshrine vernacular approaches and local materials as the way of the future as well as the past? Or are these traditional building techniques increasingly unsuitable due to demographic explosion and ecological considerations (eg, brick building in Egypt)?
- The Master Builders and Demonstration Projects  
How about design for the masses by elite architects which thereby rise above the mediocrity of the vast bulk of standardised public housing that appears as a total and seemingly unavoidable blight almost everywhere in the world? Can such architects as Correa and Diba provide suitable solutions? How about the great demonstration projects: the Weissenhofsiedlung (Stuttgart, 1927), Interbau (Berlin, 1957), and the UN Low-Cost Housing Project (Lima, Peru, 1968)? What is the track record of such efforts? What have we learned since Pruitt-Igoe? Can we escape Fathy's dictum that an architect cannot provide generalised solutions to specific, individualised needs?



*Ain Al-Sira, Cairo: residents have taken over the environment and built many additions that radically change the appearance of the original geometrical slab block*

- User's contributions to Public Housing  
Perhaps one area which has been insufficiently studied is the changes that users make in the housing types that public authorities make available to them. What do these tell us beyond the desire for more space? How do they reflect an evolving taste among the users of this housing?
- The aesthetics of mass housing  
Few mass housing projects have been able to develop aesthetic standards that have satisfied designers while maintaining costs at levels that could ensure affordability and replicability. This basic difficulty has not been resolved in any but the richest countries, and even then, for the Muslim world in particular, the ability of designers to articulate a contemporary aesthetic that has an authentic cultural resonance has proven particularly elusive. What can we say to the designers of today to help them address this particular hurdle?

### **The Individual Home**

This theme can be easily illustrated from the many winners of the previous three cycles of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, but we can provide additional examples for counter-point. Specifically, I would raise three questions:

- Modernity, tradition and lifestyle  
From the Ertegun house (a partial restoration), to the Halawa House (a recently built structure using a traditional vocabulary), to the more modern examples, with or without echoes of local culture, each house makes a statement about its time, its place, and its owner, as well as its designer. The key, from an architectural critic's point of view, is to work out the relevance of the architectural statement as well as its content. In the Muslim world today, the issues of modernity, tradition and lifestyle are at the heart of social and intellectual discourse. What are architects saying?
- The power of example  
Residences for the wealthy and the powerful have always been major trend-setters, defining "taste" and transmitting it in a "cascading" fashion through the different social strata.

Today, this has been complemented, if not supplanted, by the use of a building as an architectural “statement” that may influence entire generations of young architects, if not their potential clients.

A link back from the discussion of the individual house to the problem of mass housing can be made here by remembering the role of demonstration projects. Why do some small houses acquire this hold over the imagination while the demonstration projects have failed to dent the supremacy of the stubborn walk-up slab block?

- From individual house to community

The link between an individual house and its surroundings, and the ability of these links to constitute a community, is in the domain of the overlap between architecture and urban design. Too frequently, individual houses are assessed without reference to this off-site dimension.

*El-Wakil's Halawa House, Agamy, Egypt (1980, AKA Award winner) shows how the “Fatby style” has been adopted by Egypt's elite for their own residences.*



### **The Role of the Architect**

Inevitably, every discussion about architecture must come back to this theme. At the time when sheer numbers dictate that the bulk of housing in the Muslim world will not be built by architects and when the “architecture without architects” of the traditional villages and the squatter settlements is being extolled, a careful assessment of the role of the architect in the domain of housing is certainly a pertinent way to conclude this introductory essay.

If architects are unable to cope with the sheer magnitude of the demand, and if economics preclude an interventionist solution to mass housing, architects are nevertheless the custodians of a society’s self-image, the articulators of its aesthetic norms and the form-givers who erect the exemplars that will bear witness to their times. It is the product of designers’ dreams that fashion our consciousness, and that provide the landmarks that help us map out our environment. Architects practising in the Muslim world today should be encouraged to live up to that demanding role. This seminar will hopefully make a contribution in that direction.