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# Introduction

## Regionalism within Modernism

*Suha Özkan*

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With the all-obliterating spread of Modernism, the efforts which were made to highlight regional and local concerns, were left without enough support to survive. Alvar Aalto, found a medium to exercise his own kind of regionalism which allowed it to exist within the parameters of modernism, but one can find few references to regionalism until the early seventies. There are notable exceptions for example the works of Jane Drew, Maxwell Fry, Hassan Fathy and Rifat Chadirji. One would have to go back to Sir Edwin Lutyens and Frank Lloyd Wright to find previous references.

During the first regional seminar of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, we discussed issues related to *Identity in Architecture*. As far as architecture and design are concerned, it is very hard to talk about identity — except the identity a particular architect brings to his designs — without going into regionalism. A geographical region defines many aspects of a society both culturally and environmentally. Culture includes aspects of life and prevalent modes of expression. Natural environment includes climate and topography. A region, when properly defined, represents all of these in a very complex amalgamate. Modernism, through its sub-theme of *internationalism* proclaimed universality and world-wide applicability of certain values of architecture and over the past sixty years, almost totally discarded all the “regional” building activity. The schools of architecture, the building industry and popular ‘taste’, all united in the reinforcement of internationalism until it became an ideology representing the aspirations of all sectors of modern society. For more than half a century internationalism in style became synonymous with the representation of contemporaneity.

The main critical movement as a reaction specifically to internationalism or implicitly to modernism, is regionalism. The regionalist approach recognises the vernacular modes of building at the one extreme, and the rediscovery of Edwin Lutyens and Frank Lloyd Wright at the other. Even though it covers such a wide

array of attitudes, regionalism has respect to the local culture, to climate and at times technology, at its core.

If one has to classify the approaches, the following are the categories to be observed in regionalism though of course the boundaries of separation are not too distinct.

- a) Vernacularism;
- b) Modern-Regionalism

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### Vernacularism

Bernard Rudofsky’s “Architecture without Architects” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Arts and the catalogue, which subsequently became an indispensable reference of vernacular architecture, pointed out an area that had been ignored for a very long time. By the mid-seventies, vernacular architecture distinguished itself as an important source where the basic components of design such as climate, technology, culture and related symbolism have existed and matured over the centuries of man’s involvement with architecture.

Paul Oliver’s contribution in “Shelter and Society” and “Shelter, Sign and Symbol”, cultivated the theoretical grounds of vernacular architecture. He brought together the research of defined geographical areas of shelter in Africa, Greece and Afghanistan which displayed remarkable examples of this ignored area, not only as sources of inspiration for architect-designers but also as a viable alternative for solutions emerging in Third World countries.

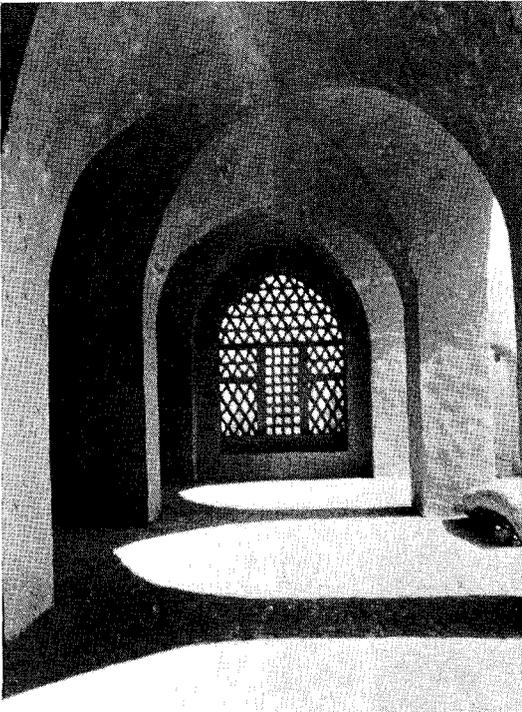
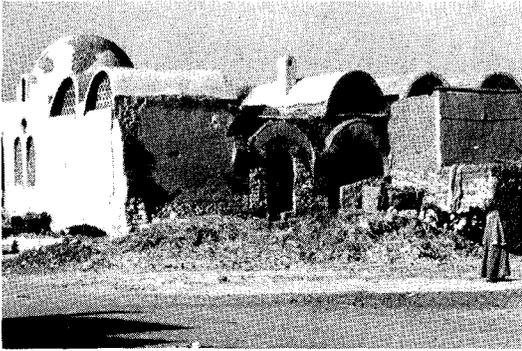
The research continued, especially in the academic and research organisations in the West, and has grown by leaps and bounds since the mid-1970’s onwards. There is now a fairly articulate stock of research covering the whole world. Both the vast research on vernacular modes of building and the culture which generated it brought back genuine interest and admiration. The building tradition that has existed and excelled over centuries has been credited and recognised as a design approach within

the realm of architectural design and its subsequent discourse.

In a very broad classification we observe two approaches to vernacularism: first is the *conservative* attitude and second, the *interpretative* attitude. While both kinds of vernacularism have the ideals of bringing a new and contemporary existence to vernacular forms and spatial arrangements, they differ in the way they treat technology and community.

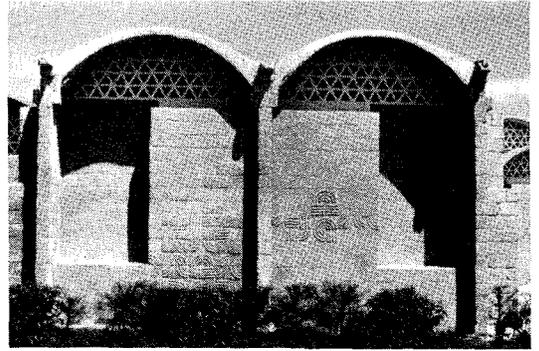
The most important contributor to conservative vernacularism is Hassan Fathy. He devoted more than half a century of his professional life to bringing

back to the vernacular mode, building tradition endangered by extinction due to the massive post-World War II building activity. The architecture employed in this activity was indifferent to the community, its inherited traditional technology, local materials and the natural environment. Fathy, single-handedly, strived to revive a building tradition and tried to grasp it on the eve of its disappearance. He was firm and uncompromising, in incorporating the societal forces but was at the same time, innovative in bringing architects' know-how and design expertise on to the scene. He cherished the materials, technology and art of building of Egyptian society and throughout his work brought a new life and meaning to them. The



Hassan Fathy, *Village of New Gourna, 1954*  
The most noteworthy attempt to bring vernacular back to existence

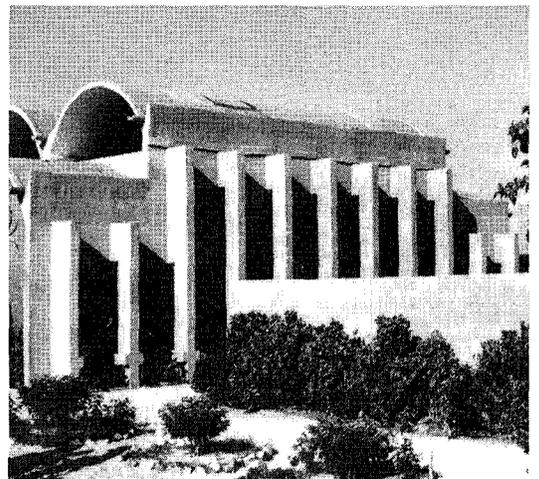
Photographs AKA, C Avedissian



UNESCO/BREDA, *Agricultural Training Centre, Nianing, Senegal, 1977*

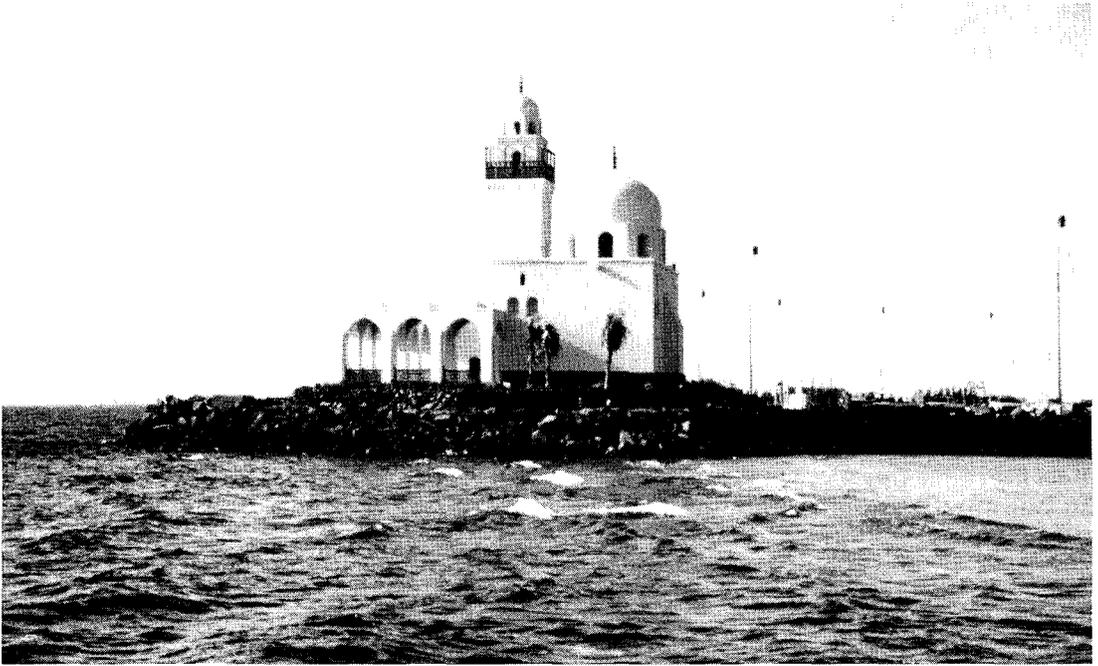
A labour intensive building system developed to generate new and complete architectural language

Photograph Suha Özkan



Raoul Snelder, *Daara School, Malika, Dakar, Senegal*  
A new intermediate technology developed to generate a new architectural language as an archetype for construction problems of a country with scarce building materials

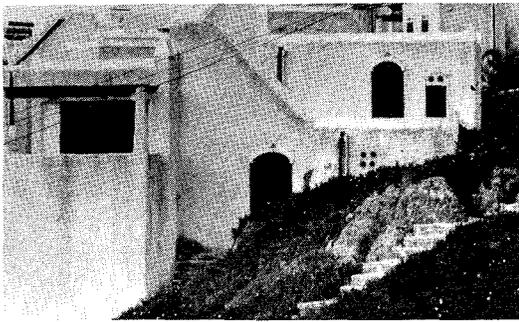
Photograph Suha Özkan.



Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, *Corniche Mosque, Jeddah, 1985*  
In the spirit of reviving traditional technology, brick bearing wall, arches and domes were used  
Photographs AKA, C Abel

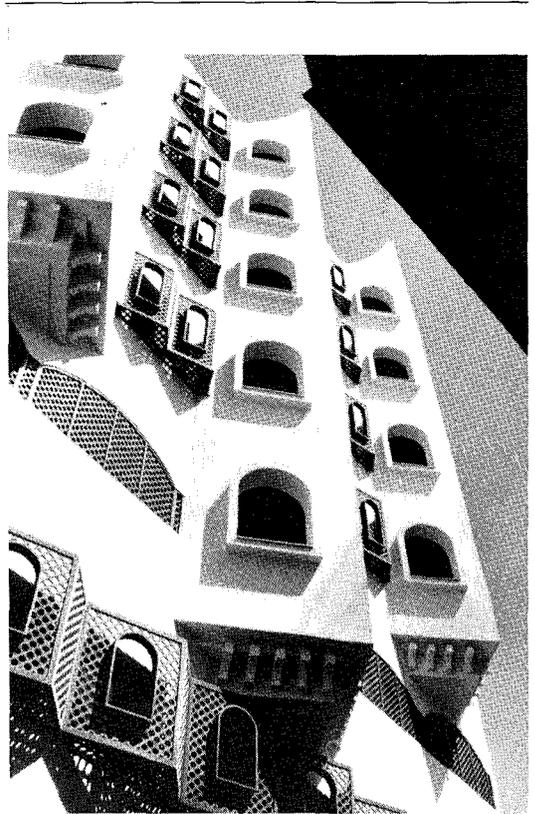
success of his regionalism varies. It did not work out well in the rural communities, whose distorted aspirations and values attached to their understanding of contemporaneity did not match the environment that Fathy offered them. Nevertheless, the meticulous and sophisticated architectural design executed solely from local materials and means, displayed qualities for the generations to come. When Fathy adopted the same approach, but in a more durable material — stone instead of earth — this not only increased the acceptability but also offered him the opportunity to incorporate the finest examples of revived building crafts. Of course this category of building had to be private residences. While he displayed this design excellence in these buildings, the ideas he developed for the rural habitat echoed all over the world as a viable alternative solution for the action groups like Craterre, Development Workshop and ADAUA who employed his ideas. Architects such as André Ravereau, Nader Khalili, Abdel Wahed El-Wakil, followed in his footsteps in vernacular technology.

The interpretative version of vernacularism is referred to here as *neo-vernacularism* which has emerged as an approach to bringing a new life to vernacular heritage for new and contemporary functions. The widest area of the application of this approach is obviously the architecture for tourism and culture. During the short term experience when tourists take their vacation the regional vernacular becomes an integral part of the anticipated ambience. Therefore tourist developments became the pioneering example of neo-vernacularism. Since modern comfort, ease of construction and maintenance are inevitably impor-



*EPA, Holiday Village in Bodrum, Turkey, 1971–79  
Local forms and settlement patterns revived in conventional  
technology and precast accessories to imitate the prevalent  
vernacular  
Photographs Suha Özkan*

tant factors, they utilised levels of technology which usually had nothing to do with those which existed regionally. Similarly with the infrastructure, heating, cooling, and technical services. In these efforts more of a lip service was given to the regional components, and therefore, architecture became more of an expression of local shapes and forms where culture is also reduced to souvenirs and folklore. Like any other architectural involvement, these attempts met with the varying degrees of success, depending on the sincerity of the designer-architect; on whether they wanted to simply design a stage-set with pastiche or if they wished to create genuine spatial and architectural experience.



*A building in Jeddah, 1985  
A typical clip-on regionalism exercised on a mediocre  
modern building to make an attempt to have it contextually  
relevant  
Photograph AKA, Ahmet Eyüce*

Despite all the problems stemming from the pre-occupation of image-making, these developments, being more in line with the local setting, created less oppressive environments. They also helped to develop a vocabulary of contemporary architecture which has its roots in the building tradition of a particular culture. In short, vernacularism and neo-vernacularism differ from each other mainly at the level of the user, labour for building, materials used and the construction technology employed. Obviously this means a lot of difference in reference to the societal context.

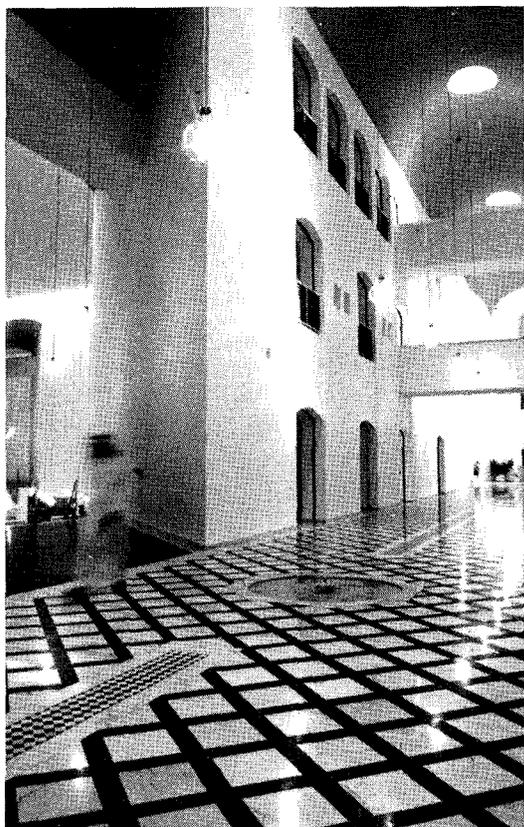
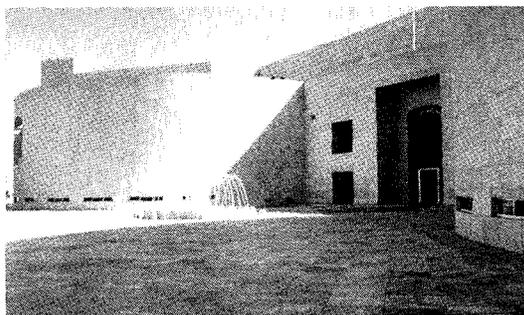
Neo-vernacularism approaches have dominated a vast amount of design activity to mainly accommodate habitation and tourism functions. It must be due to them being "taken for granted" or to their less innovative, more conformist nature that they did not generate any noteworthy or great architecture. The practitioners of this approach mainly became unknown or unnoticed architects.

The applicability of this mode of design has limited validity, however, especially when small scale units become a large building, e.g. a civic complex. The relevant guidance of vernacularism is limited, unless a reinterpretation is made or what has existed is stretched. Here the terminology has to be changed, as vernacularism represents only one, admittedly limited, section of regionalism.

### Modern regionalism

It should be repeated here again and must be clearly pointed out that what has been rejected by most of the regionalist architects is not modernism but internationalism. Modernism demands a respect for inherent qualities of building materials, expressiveness for structure, functional justifications for forms that constitute buildings. These abstract demands do not contradict much, in essence, with anything done by an architect who wishes to adopt a regionalist approach. Internationalism however, demanding the necessity to reduce the building to skin and bones has a completely different line of discourse which is a well accommodated sub-theme in modernism. Therefore, it would not be wrong to stress that the polarity is between *internationalism* which demands a global relevance for its existence and *regionalism* which seeks meaning and content under specific local conditions. To achieve the goals of the latter, modernism provides tools and techniques to cope with the problems. Additionally it also offers a code of ethics and categories of aesthetics by means which the achievements can be assessed.

Unlike vernacularism, modern regionalism can be employed at all scales of building activity, since it derives from the monumental architecture of the past,



Henning Larsen, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Riyadh, 1984  
The fortress-like well protected outside wall defines intricately detailed interiors

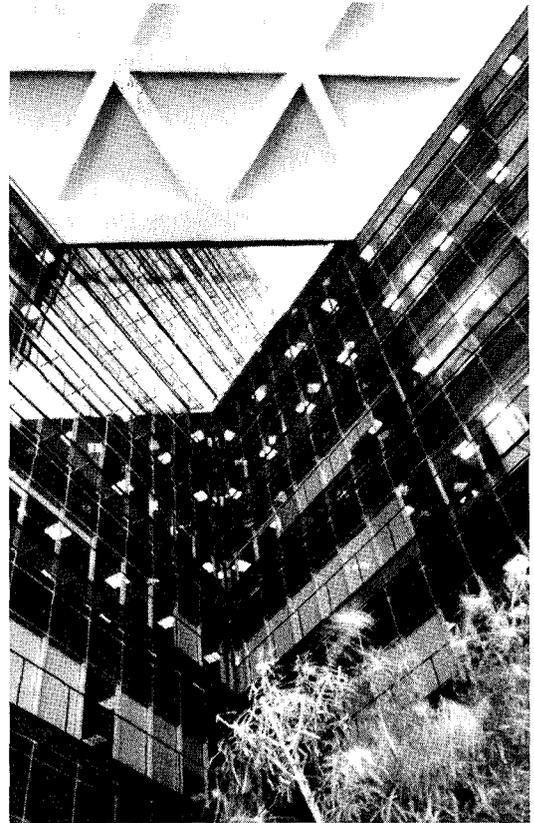
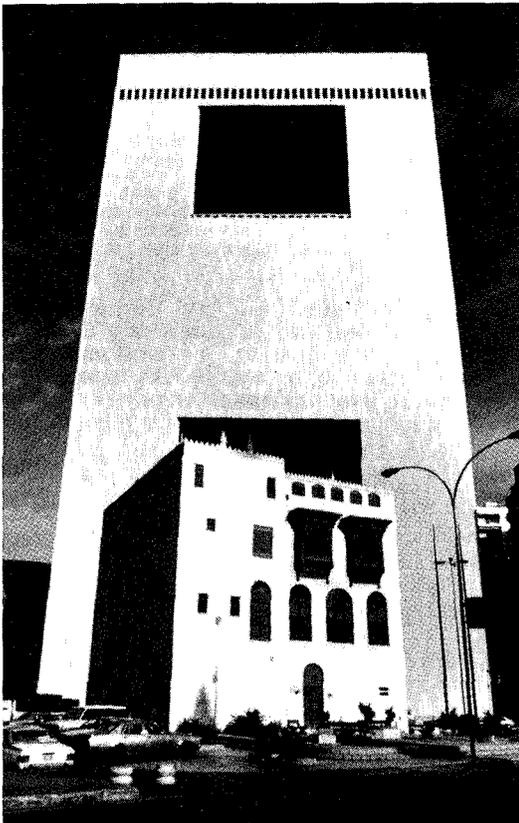
Photographs AKA, P Marechaux

as well as to the civil architecture to which vernacularism has to confine itself. Modern regionalism in very broad terms can be handled by employing two categories of reference: *concrete* and *abstract*. Concrete regionalism accommodates all approaches to regional expressions which copy features, fragments, or entire buildings, in the region. When these buildings are loaded with spiritual values of symbolic relevance, they become much more acceptable in their new form, owing to the values attached to the original. Of course it brings a comfortable defence in support of the new, backed by the qualities of the old. In many cases, when the existence of contemporaneity in new is stressed, they become so well accepted that they are considered as being "ideal". In this approach the mutual existence of rejection and acceptance of time has a "schizophrenic" mix. Contemporaneity is accepted by acknowledging the need to accommodate the requirements. This is further acknowledged by the use of contemporary materials and construction techniques. However the forms and spaces usually belong to the distant past.

The concrete replication of the motives and achievements of the past now has a very comfortable cover

as they are interpreted as references to the past. There is however a wide spectrum of architectural involvement from a thoughtful eclecticism to a worthless pastiche. The ethos of both extremes has not been spelled out properly and it demands elaboration. Therefore the references for judgement remain vague, and seemingly, they will remain so for some time because a reaction to the Modern Movement and the achievements of post-modernism — which definitely covers what we call here concrete regionalism — has not yet developed its own ethos. To judge this against the ethics and aesthetics of Modernism would not be fair. The vacuum this creates is dangerous because it would lead to an "anything goes" situation which probably is what has been happening all over the world, especially in the Islamic world, in which many of the countries that are building nowadays are situated.

Abstracting elements from the past in order to derive building form from it constitutes what we call "abstract regionalism". It is a very difficult and fine line to follow. It mainly incorporates the abstract qualities of a building, for example, massing, solids and void, proportions, sense of space, use of light, and



Gordon Bunschraft, S.O M., National Commercial Bank H Q, Jeddah, 1983

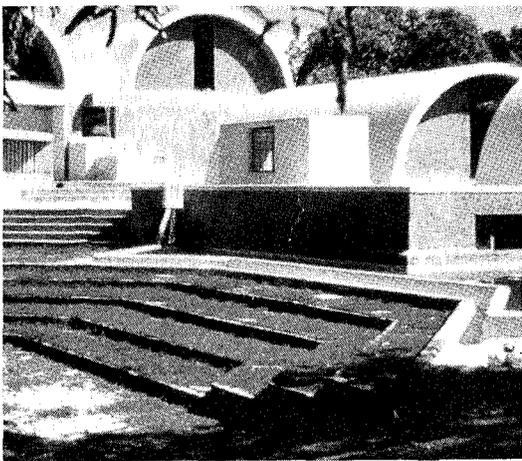
*A novel expression of courtyards in a high-rise prestige building. Makes very abstract reference to the tradition by interpreting climatic determinant like sun, air draft and protected space.*

Photographs AKA, P Marechaux

structural principles in their reinterpreted form. It also endeavours to bring back to existence the cultural issues. An attempt is made to define in terms of design elements the prevalent culture of the region concerned. This is a long, tedious and sometimes endless devotion to an ideal. The line which separates a solemn, praiseworthy, regionalist achievement from a worthless pastiche or a potpourri of the past, is very thin and delicate. In the division of the two we still do not have any other criteria than that we have developed with modernism. To these, many of the contributors to regionalist endeavour have subscribed. These contributors to the regionalist modernism emphasised and developed certain important aspects of regionalism.

Charles Correa has put his endeavour into a nutshell by entitling his approach "Form follows climate" where he gives priority to the macro environment which determines many aspects of the built form. Rifat Chadirji generated an articulate facadism which refers back to the architectural heritage in Iraq. Mohammad Makiya, another eminent Iraqi, especially in his earlier buildings, searched for sublime regional expressions for modern buildings. Sedad Eldem has coupled a continuous search into sources of traditional architecture with a modern practice which derives from, and reinterprets, the findings in these sources. From the younger generation, Raj Rewal brings a contemporary existence to the traditional understanding of space and to its cultural implication. Rasem Badran, Doruk Pamir, Charles Boccara, and many other, have elevated the quality of the contemporary architectural environment, by employing the regional idiom, regional input and environmental determinants. Here in Dhaka, the

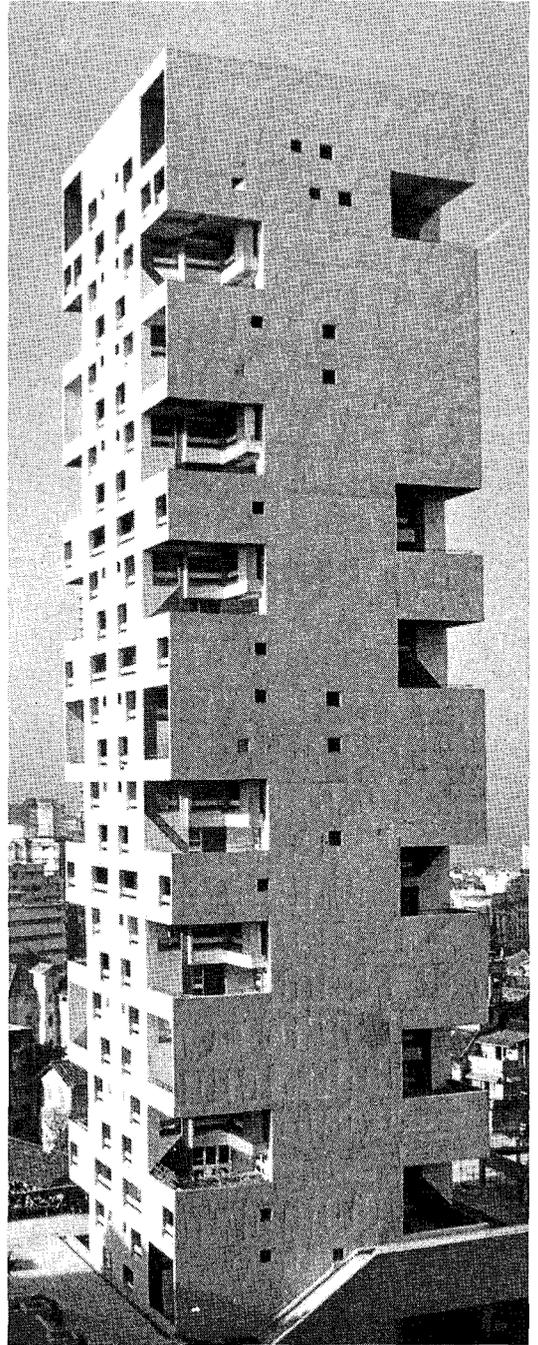
efforts of Muzharul Islam, from Bangladesh, to develop an architectural idiom from limited resources and technology, is a noteworthy contribution to regionalism for generations to learn, explore and develop.



*Balkrishna Doshi, Sangath, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, 1980*

*A series of simple vaults blending into the landscape.*

*Photograph AKA A Archives*



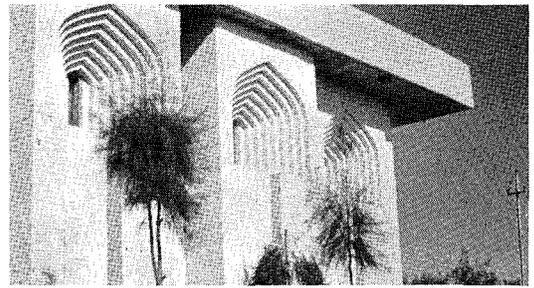
*Charles Correa, Kanchanjunga Apartments, Bombay, 1970-83*

*An attitude to bridge the imposing climatic and cultural factors with the inevitable reality of high rise building*

*Photograph courtesy of the architect*



*Rifat Chadirji, Tobacco Monopolies Offices and Stores, Baghdad, 1969*  
*An articulate facadism relating a contemporary function to its Iraqi context*  
*Photograph AKA A Archives*



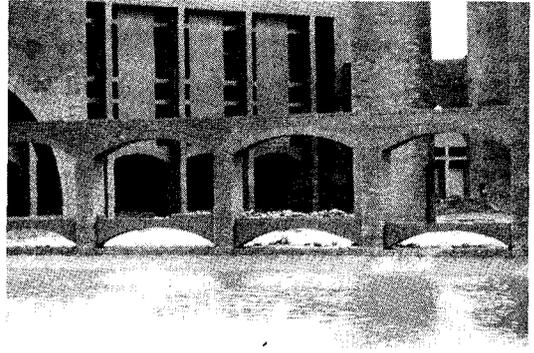
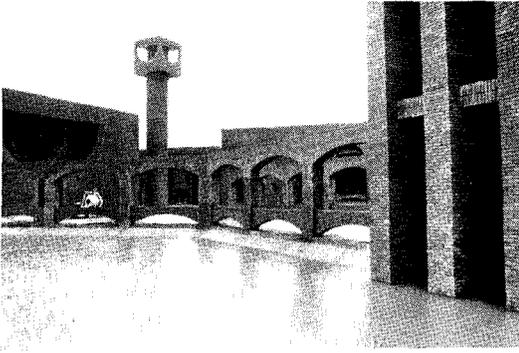
*Mohammad Makiya, Rafidain Bank, Kufa, Baghdad, 1968*  
*Corbelling arches, protected recessed windows and cantilevering eaves subtly refer to the sun hit macro climate of Baghdad and its architectural past*  
*Photograph AKA A Archives*



*Sedad H. Eldem, Taslık Coffee House, Istanbul, 1956.*  
*A distinctive example of using elements of traditional architecture in contemporary context*  
*Photograph Suha Özkan*



*Sedad H. Eldem, Social Security Council, Istanbul, 1968*  
*An early example of contextual building in a sensitive area of Old Istanbul*  
*Photograph AKA A, A Dündar*

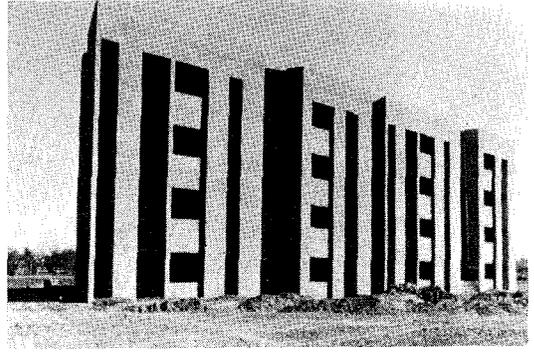


*M Doruk Pamir, E Gümrik Islamic Centre for Research and Training, Dhaka, 1982*  
*A campus planned to introduce Islamic civic scale with local material and technology*  
*Photographs AKAAs Archives*

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*Charles Boccara, Assif Housing, Marrakesh, 1982*  
*Low-rise apartment blocks integrated into the Moroccan way of life by use of elements from the architectural past.*  
*Photograph AKAAs, Saïd Zulficar.*



*Muzharul Islam, Jaipurhat Housing, Jaipurhat, Bangladesh*  
*A bold expression of brick construction in search for a regional identity in Bangladesh*  
*Photograph AKAAs Archives*