Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture

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How should one analyse and articulate these three different concepts that refer to so many complex activities? Since we are dealing with architectural education, we must examine Islamic culture and modernity in the perspective of architectural activity today. Thus, our search and thought will be directed towards students and professionals in architecture. In other words, we have to answer questions such as the following:

What place should Islamic culture have in the training of students at schools of architecture?

What aspects of Islamic culture are relevant to this training?

How should these aspects be taught to encourage modern thinking in Islam as well as in architecture?

How should one approach modernity itself in order to bring into our knowledge of Islam and of design practice creative methods and new exploration?

Other questions will be raised in the course of this essay. Our aim is to introduce architects to the main difficulties that have accumulated since Islamic culture had to face the impact of modernity in the nineteenth century. The objective knowledge of these difficulties is a prerequisite for any improvement in the curriculum followed in schools of architecture.

I shall start with basic information on Islamic culture and modernity. With these references in mind, we can try to think afresh about a key concept in Islamic history: the concept of rupture.

Islamic Culture

This expression is used currently today by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to stress the impact of Islam on all levels of social and historical existence in the so-called "Muslim societies". Since Islam is used as a mobilising reference by many political movements, all important activities in societies are described as "Islamic". That is why we need to question the legitimacy of the expression, Islamic culture.

It would be enlightening to ask why we speak more commonly of Western culture with its different national expressions - German, English, French, Spanish culture - than of "Christian culture". Why, on the contrary, do we use more often and more naturally the expression Islamic culture than terms such as Egyptian, Turkish or Iranian culture? The difference is due to the historical process that generated a secularised culture in one case, but strengthened and generalised a religious perception in the other. If we study carefully this historical process, we can correct the false image of Islam that is imposed by Muslim tradition and translated without adequate explanation by many Orientalists.

In the classical age of the history of Islam, that is, during its first five centuries, i.e. between the seventh and eleventh centuries AD, a clear distinction was made between mundane culture named adab and religious culture practiced as religious sciences ('ulum dinizyya). Adab is literature, poetry, language, the wisdom of nations, history, geography, education, the social code of good behaviour, scientific skills that can be mastered in a rational and educated way, and professional activities, especially those of the officials in the administration of the Caliphate. 'Udaba were those cultivated, learned, active writers, poets, physicians, philosophers, judges, government ministers who constituted the urban elites in classical Muslim society. Their knowledge and social activities were related to mundane realities or the terrestrial life called dunya. Religion, or din, was, of course, present, but as a general, accepted set of beliefs, explanations, rules, rites and visions relating man, the creature, to God, the Creator. The state run by the Caliph, dawla, had to apply religious law to maintain the mundane life along the lines and in the spirit taught by religion. These are the three d's - din, dunya, dawla; three differentiated but articulated spaces in which all human existence has to unfold. There has been a rich literature dealing with the relations between the three d's; many books on ethics and politics are entitled Adab al-dunya wa'l-din, comprising the knowledge and education that one needed in mundane and religious existence.

It is not right to repeat that "Islam" does not separate religion and politics. Of course, the theological and legal view insist on the priority of religion as the revealed truth to organise and to rule the City according to the Divine Will, but this theoretical claim did not prevent the development of a mundane culture and a political practice that was actually cut off from religious principles.

The differentiation between religious thinking, knowledge and life on one side, and mundane culture and profane existence on the other, reached a high degree of elaboration with the dominating philosophical trend under the Buyid dynasty (320-454 AH /932-1052 AD). During this period, a humanist culture expressed in Arabic was developed primarily in Iraq-Iran. One has to speak, then, not on an homogenous Islamic culture, but on cultural trends in an Islamic context.

How this humanist achievement came to be replaced by rigid "orthodox" teaching in the official schools, or madrasas, founded by the Seljuk dynasty (429-590 AH /1038-1194 AD) is another historical step which needs special attention. The concept of orthodoxy is understood in the Muslim tradition to embody the authentic continuity of the original teaching of the Qur'an and the Prophet. However, historically, it is the transformation of culture and thought as it has been imposed by political power, by the Caliphate and the various princes, or umara, who conquered their position by force. One very significant example can help to illustrate orthodoxy as an ideological concept that shaped the culture in an Islamic context from the eleventh to the twentieth century.

After the year 432 AH /1041 AD., an important text known as the official creed of the Abbasid Caliph al-Qadir (d.422/1031) was frequently read in public gatherings. This text is a rigorous Sunnite definition of what a true Muslim should believe. Among many strict beliefs set forth in a dogmatic style,
there is a prohibition against referring to the theory of God's created Speech, which embodied an important tenet of a rival theological school, that of the rationalist Mu'tazilites. This meant that political power—the Caliph—could decide theological issues without any intellectual confrontation. It was a decisive shift from religious and intellectual concerns to ideological-dogmatic attitudes that have increasingly dominated all cultural life in Muslim societies to this day.

We have so far presented the learned urban culture expanded in the Islamic Empire during the classical age. This culture was shared to various degrees by the architects who built the monuments, mosques, palaces, and houses for the urban rich. It was not necessarily shared through a written literature; oral ways of teaching and communication were more efficient than written ones. The aesthetic and mythic environment was also expressed and shared through various arts, crafts, celebrations, collective rites that were all related to very ancient culture that were adapted and vivified in the new Islamic context. Architecture, painting, planning were influenced by Byzantine, Iranian, Roman, Indian, Turkish, Mughal, and other traditions. That is why it is difficult to speak generally of "Islamic" architecture. When we speak of architecture in the spirit of Islam, we forget that Islam itself as a religion and a system of thought has been influenced by several traditions of culture that were deeply rooted in the Middle East a long time before the manifestation of the Qur'an. There is, particularly, a common ancient Mediterranean space that was perpetuated and expanded by Roman, Byzantine, Christian and Islamic empires until the time of the creation of the West as a new cultural entity, one characterised by modernity. Islam cannot be presented as a purely Oriental religion and culture, isolated from the Mediterranean world of myths, archetypes, systems of thought, tradition of knowledge, ways of representation, rules of life, types of forms, urban fabric and rural exploitation.

This broad historical and anthropological view of culture in the Islamic context is rejected and negated by the strong and widespread ideological vision of Islam that has been imposed throughout the present Muslim world by political movements labelled "Islamic" movements. Here we face a big issue. The most impressive architectural projects performed in the last twenty years in several Muslim countries are either just produced by modern technology or are more influenced by the conventional, formalistic, standardised representations of a so-called "Islamic" culture or tradition than by the pluralistic and rich trends which characterised cultural life during the classical period, as we have discussed. Many mosques illustrate this fact.

The urgent task of modern teaching is to emancipate the present vision from apologetic, scholastic and conformist perception of the Muslim heritage. I do not mean that we must go back to the culture and architecture of the classical age, a return that is the typical, mythological claim of the Muslim attitude that was developed under the name of Salafiya. This involved a return to the form and the substance of religion as it was exemplified by the Salaf; the pious ancestors of the time of the Prophet and the so-called Rightly Guided (Orthodox) Caliphs. To get free of this pious dream, we must first understand what is meant by modernity and how Islam can be presented today through a system of thought open to the new scientific spirit.

Modernity

All aspects of our existence in contemporary societies are ordered and produced by what is called modernity. Modernity characterised by a continuous and rapid technological and intellectual change is our present way of life and thought. All societies are not equally concerned with and affected by modernity, and modernity does not have everywhere and for all groups in a given society the same components and expressions, but no society, no group, is totally untouched by modernity, whether positively or negatively.

Because modernity is among us, in us, we need to make a special effort in order to subject it to a critical evaluation. We are used to perceiving tradition in opposition to modernity, primitive or archaic cultures in opposition to modern civilisation and knowledge. During the colonial period and even today, Western thought developed a theory of modern civilisation based on a Eurocentric outlook that has been used for legitimising Western domination over underdeveloped, "traditional", primitive societies.

This outlook is still evident in the way in which aspects of Muslim societies are described today, and many Islamists insist on the opposition of Muslim tradition to modernity. What does this mean? To what extent and in what conditions can any given tradition be opposed to modernity?

The first danger we should avoid is that of reducing modernity to all contemporary aspects of life as opposed to those of antiquity or of the past; in each stage of history new and ancient elements of life and thought are in an interactive process that leads the "modern" to become traditional or out of date. The Qur'an introduced, for example, a tremendous modernity in all levels of existence of the Arabian society at the beginning of the seventh century. This modernity has been embodied to various degrees in many societies, and this modernity also became the Islamic tradition, which means for believers the uppermost expression of the Truth. For those who adopt this latter conception, modernity becomes viewed as totally negative and described as bid'a, or "innovation". In this vein, material discoveries and new tools such as the radio, camera, television, or telephone have been considered as dangerous or negative innovations; special authorisation by Muslim jurists was needed to prove that such "innovation" did not conflict with the Tradition.

This is the paradoxical use of religion by societies. Initially, a deep change is introduced in the values and the symbolic system of representations, and all subsequent changes can be accepted and integrated in the new system. However, under the pres-
sure of the state and cultural constraints, the symbolic system is changed by jurists and theologians into legal codes and dogmatic principles, and into postulates imposing one creed for all believers, whose history is then controlled by those same rigid codes and creeds.

To understand the nature, functions and horizons of modernity in societies influenced over many centuries by the phenomena of Revelation, it is necessary to consider the competing concept of societies of the Book. A very confusing situation has been created by the historical evolution of Western societies since the sixteenth century. Let us try to emancipate our present thought from this growing confusion. For this purpose, we shall analyse first societies of the Book; second, secularised societies.

Societies of the Book

Societies of the Book are all those deeply influenced during many centuries by the phenomena of Revelation, the word of God, as it has been collected and recorded in the Holy Scriptures, which are the Book = Biblos = Kitab. This definition includes, of course, the three main manifestations of Revelation through Moses in the Bible, through Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels, through Muhammad in the Qur’an. We do not consider here the particular systematisations of Revelation as it has been elaborated by theologians for their own communities. These elaborations are, of course, different; for Christians, the Word of God is incarnated in Jesus presented as the Son of God; for Muslims, the Word of God is expressed by God Himself in the Arabic language and communicated by the Prophet Mohammad, and the Jewish conception is one that is closer to that of Muslims. But these are just modalities of expression and transmission of the same basic phenomena. God speaks to mankind to guide people on the Right ways leading to Salvation. This belief takes material form in a typical “speech” expanded by theologians, lawyers, artists, writers, craftsmen, builders, and others in cultural productions. We must stress the general impact of these phenomena so that we can differentiate between the “modern”, secularised mental space and the religious space that we are trying to discover. There is no sphere of activity or knowledge that can be recognised or accepted outside the limits traced by Revelation. Reason itself is the obedient servant of Revelation in the following fields of its activities:

1) In relation to language. Language is taught by God, meaning that it is primarily rooted in the “names taught by God”; secondly, in the realities created by God. This definition is directly opposed to the modern conception according to which language is a system of signs, like all other semiological systems.

2) In relation to society and terrestrial history. Both are seen and interpreted in the eschatological perspective of eternal life, of punishment, reward and salvation. I refer, for example, to the vision of St Augustine in Christianity, of al-Ghazali in Islam.

3) In relation to the community as a body politic. Political power has no legitimacy outside the authority of God expressed in this Speech, explicated by theologians with authorised, unanimously accepted methods (ecclesiastical hierarchy; rabbis; ‘ulama).

4) In relation to the physical world. All existing things are signs referring to God as the Creator; the vision of the created world is opposed to the modern experimental vision of the “objective” world that one can know only through one’s perception (critical epistemology of knowledge).

5) In the relation to value. Aesthetic, ethical, intellectual and spiritual values are true when they are rooted in the Absolute of God; wrong when they are unrooted, not derived correctly from the Revelation.

Economic value has no existence by itself; material property is illegitimate if it is not purified by its use for the sake of God. In Islam, the divine law or shari’ah gives a legal qualification, or hukm, to every existing thing in the word, to any initiative, attitude, thought or judgement manifested by a man in his life. All is finalised, seen, evaluated in the perspective of God, to whom every individual existence is related in the present life and the hereafter.

This all-encompassing vision needs, of course, to be described with more detail in each society and each stage of history, but our purpose here is just to suggest how radical the mental rupture is between societies of the Book and present-day secularised societies. All the vocabulary used in the former societies is no longer relevant to the latter: parables, metaphors, signs, transcendence, mysticism, adoration, contemplation, value, truth, absolute and all related qualifications are reconsidered in the context of our intellectual modernity and technological power.

It is currently objected that Islam is imposing again even vis-à-vis the West the traditional vision common to societies of the Book, but we shall show that this is just an ideological and apologetic claim without any historical or theological base. On the contrary, the so-called Muslim societies are increasing the gap between the traditional vision of societies of the Book and a material modernity cut off from its original intellectual roots.

Secularised Societies

Secularisation is commonly presented as a historical evolution and a cultural achievement specific to Western societies. According to this image, the process of secularisation started in the sixteenth century with the renaissance and Reformation, and had a continuous success and expansion through political revolutions, scientific discoveries, industrialisation, urban development, rural migrations to the growing cities. The capitalist system of production and exchange imposed a new relation to the physical world, an individualist philosophy based on a positivist knowledge and a strict separation between religious beliefs and politics. In France, the separation between the State and the Church reached a definite legal expression in 1905, but already the French Re-
volution in 1789 had brought about a major symbolic rupture when Louis XVI was executed; political power legitimised and made sacred by the Church in the ancien régime was at that point delegated to the people by imposing popular sovereignty.

All this is true, and more can be said on the bourgeoisie as a secularising social class facing the Church as a political and economic force since the Middle Ages. The confrontation became harsher and more decisive when the working class appeared in the industrialised societies as a more radical secularising force "enlightened" by Marxist philosophy. The bourgeoisie created a secularised state, but adhered to an idealist philosophy open to religious inspiration and symbolic values praised in societies of the Book. Marx and Engels rejected metaphysical idealism as well as theological systems of thought inherited from societies of the Book. In the same intellectual line of radical criticism, Nietzsche deconstructed the geneology of ethics and repudiated the moral values derived from traditional religious techniques. Freud added to this intellectual revolution the discovery of the deep psychic structure commanding the life of the so-called conscious.

It is essential to understand that secularisation is not a simple change in material civilisation; it is mainly and more radically a shift from one mental structure and space to another; all the knowledge inherited from medieval and classical ages is either cancelled or reinvested in the new cognitive vision, methods and postulates. A new reason with new categories, horizons and ambitions is used in all scientific activities instead of the "eternal" reason imposed and shared in societies of the Book. Actually, the new reason and science destroyed and transformed another reason that had been used for, a longer time and in a broader popular level of life than the reason involved in societies of the Book. I refer here to pragmatic knowledge, institutions, culture, social structures, economic systems of production and exchanges used in each ethnic group living in archaic societies.
For example, in North Africa today, there are three types of reason and culture:

1) The more primitive and ancient one represented in the Berber groups before conversion to Jewish, Christian or Islamic beliefs;
2) The traditional one related to societies of the Book;
3) The modern, contemporary one introduced since the nineteenth century by the West.

These three levels can be seen in the customs, social and political institutions, economic activities, styles of building and urbanisation. As an example, one could look at the architecture in the M'Zab of Southern Algeria.

There has been over the centuries a dialectical interaction between the first two levels, before secularised culture appeared and marginalised the archaic and traditional "reasons". This competition is described by anthropologists as an unequal struggle between oral and written culture; a mythological versus a logocentric use of the reasons. Logocentrism as a demythologising, rationalising culture started with Aristotle (as against Plato), expanded in the Middle Ages and invaded all intellectual space with the development of modern science. The struggle has been strong between philosophers and religious 'ulama in Islam. The philosophical (i.e. logocentric) trend passed to the West after the twelfth century, especially through Averroes' and Avicenna's works.

In the contemporary Muslim world, the competition between societies of the Book and secularising forces is stronger, harsher and more decisive than it had ever been since the emergence of Islam as a historical force and a cultural system. Why do Muslims resist secularism more than Westerners or the Japanese? Is it because Islam has already discovered, taught and actualised all the sciences, institutions, economic and social organisations introduced by modernity? Is it also because modernity is a bad way of life that leads man astray from the Right Path traced by God in the Revelation? Or, is it, rather, because the majority of the Muslim population is still dominated by the archaic and traditional culture, and thus, unprepared to receive the more sophisticated culture produced by modernity? These questions are and should be the major part of the intellectual and scientific training in academic teaching today: it is the only chance for Muslim societies to understand and master all the consequences of the historical rupture, which have not been seriously considered as the key phenomena dominating the present evolution.

The Concept of Historical Rupture

Muslim contemporary discourse rejects totally the concept of historical rupture in the existence of Islam, understood as a religion of eternal, unchangeable values entirely revealed by God; correctly, scrupulously, accurately transmitted and interpreted by authorised learned men, the 'ulama or a'imma mujtahidun. The companions of the Prophet, or sahaba, were the first and most privileged generation of Muslims, all favoured by God with perfect intellectual and ethical gifts so that they memorised, understood and explained perfectly the integral heritage of the Revelation: the Qur'an and the Tradition, the sunna or hadith of Muhammad. The following generations learned from the sahaba and perpetuated all of the body of knowledge called Islam, to which all Muslims have to turn for all their terrestrial needs, activities and production. Interpretations, applications of this divine, eternal knowledge can be different, and indeed they have been, are and will be different. However, there is only one orthodox interpretation and actualisation in the historical process of Muslim societies. That is why the law, the shari'a derived from the authentic corpus of the Divine Knowledge, is also unchangeable, not subject to historicity. According to this vision, states like Pakistan, the Sudan, Arabia and Iran have restored the shari'a.

"True" Islam, seen and lived from "inside" is totally cut off from history. If a Muslim historian mentions, for example, that three so-called "Rightly Guided Caliphs" have been assassinated, three objections are raised against him by the militants for "eternal Islam": that he fails to see Islam from inside because he adopts "Western" knowledge; that he is just an Orientalist, hostile to "Islam"; and that, actually, the three Caliphs were killed by non-Muslims, who were opposed to Islam. Similarly, if one tried to describe this type of perception and knowledge as being typically and basically mythological, related to the social "imaginary" more than to historical reason, the same collective voice, using the contemporary Muslim discourse, objects that mythology does not exist in the Qur'an, the "imaginary" and even imagination cannot be invoked to deal with "eternal" Islam, which is entirely built on a perfect, scientific, heavenly Reason. When the Qur'an speaks of mythology in the meaning of legends, false fables, it uses the world astura which, in modern Arabic, conveys the concept of myth. Of course, the total lack of correlation between ustura and the modern anthropological concept of myth is not thought through and remains unthinkable in the context of the present Muslim discourse.

The mental context of this collective discourse explains the semantic manipulation made of the Qur'an by all those who select verses or fragments of verses, cutting it from their linguistic and cultural-historical context to introduce it in the present ideological context with rights and all the related vocabulary used in the contemporary political discourse. It is just the same procedure used by architects who cut classical buildings and their semiotic environment and introduce it in a totally different urban fabric and with different semiotic functions.

What do all these remarks mean? To what conclusions do they necessarily lead? We can provide some answers if we follow two inseparable ways of thinking and research:

1) The imaginary production of societies.
2) The search for a more adequate relation between knowledge and reality.
The Imaginary Production of Societies

Any given society in any given time is produced by the continuously combined, interacting activity of reason and imagination. However, the history of the past is usually presented as a rational or, at least, a rationalised process, which excludes the participation of imagination. Imagination is the privilege of poets, artists and prophets; it creates images, parabolas, symbols to add an aesthetic dimension to the realities of human existence, or to show a transcendent truth beyond the ordinary explanations of reason. This is the creative imagination that is at work in all myths and symbols invented by each community to recapitulate its origins and permanent values. However, imagination is also receptive to illusions, incorrect representations of reality, images of truth generated through social and political rivalries in which competing groups interpret a common heritage — like Islam as expressed in the Qur'an and the experience of Mohammed in Madina — in accordance with their divergent interests and aims. Mythological and ideological systems of representation are thus derived from the original myths and symbols shared by several groups or different ethno-cultural communities. These systems are generated, memorised and used as a model of collective thinking and acting thanks to the social "imaginary" and collective memory. The contemporary Islamic discourse, as I have presented it, is a typical illustration of the social "imaginary" generated out of the time of Revelation and Prophetic teaching and producing the history of societies through representations of that era which are taken as the authentic continuity of the revealed Truth in Willo Tempore. We have seen that the central characteristic of these representations is the negation of history and the disguising of procedures in order to transform social, psychological, political realities into idealised images of the eternal Message.

The disguising process covering the actual history with idealised images started at least as early as the political triumph of Mu'awiya in A.D. 661 when the original experience of articulating political power to the Authority of God was reversed and the political power began to use the Authority of God just as an idealised image to be manipulated by the 'ulama to legitimise the so-called Caliphate. This was the first rupture in the history of Islam. The second rupture was intellectual and cultural: after the ninth century, classical pluralist Islamic thought started to be neglected and forgotten under the pressure of "orthodoxy". The third rupture appeared after the nineteenth century when Western modernity was introduced in Muslim societies. The intellectual and scientific distance between "orthodox" Islam and modernity has been deepened by two divergent evolutions. Muslims continued to oppose an imaginary vision of a Golden Age of Islam to conquering modernity, exploring more and more the world, human existence, societies, history. According to them, modernity says "Man is the vice-gerent of God on the earth". They repeat this against all the concrete economic, social, political forces operating in present-day societies; again they cover up reality with so-called religious teachings.

Architecture as an Integrating Activity

What are the consequences of this historical evolution and the present socio-cultural situation for architecture as an integrating activity? Architecture and the urban fabric in the last twenty years cannot be evaluated outside the conflicting visions and the divergent interests of the new social classes in Muslim societies.

A useful distinction must be made between an integrated architecture and an integrating, but not necessarily integrated architecture. The first is people building for people according to commonly shared culture, needs, tools, materials, economic possibilities or solidarities. The second is official, conceived and performed by highly trained architects for the upper classes, the ruling political elite or rich individuals. The values involved in the two are different. The integrating function of the official architecture depends on its capacity to include collective concerns, basic needs, deeply rooted aspirations, forms and symbols crossing social and economic frontiers. Mosques, cathedrals, synagogues, and temples are integrated and integrating monuments as long as they have been built by a collective effort: craftsmen, masons, engineers and highly inspired artists sharing the symbolic beliefs of the traditional societies. It is not only a question of styles and forms of building; the status of the work itself contributes to strengthen the integrating function of the built environment. Once a salary is paid to every worker by an anonymous state or a big firm, ancient emotional relations to the work change.

With the end of the participation of members of a traditional guild, people, a village or inhabitants of a quarter of a city, the symbolic capital shared by the group is replaced by strict technical execution of the work in the time that has been set and paid for, excluding aesthetic, ethical and spiritual investments by the individual in a collective enterprise.

The links between the built environment, the workers, the work and the shared symbolic capital can be illustrated by a comparison between the ancient mosques in Damascus or Kariouan, for example, and the recently constructed Mosques of Brussels or Geneva. In the first, the functions are essential, numerous, dynamic and far-reaching, and include the whole socio-cultural space; in the second case, the mosque is an isolated, abstract space — indeed, an isolating place, cut off from the rest of socio-cultural life instead of integrating it in any sense.

The same disintegration can be noticed in Muslim societies themselves, where modern economies and demographic pressures have produced the situation described by Charles Correa about Bombay. Great, inspired architects can produce masterpieces of architecture, richly conceived and beautifully designed in total harmony with the physical elements and spaces; however, these masterpieces, like the National
Assembly built by Louis Kahn in Dhaka can be, at the same time, totally alien to the whole society. However, such successful masterpieces as pure architectural performances are very rare. In Muslim societies we mostly find Western models reproduced either with a highly sophisticated technology, or on a modest scale for average people. The historical rupture described above is translated in a discontinuous built environment where rich modern villas, modern hotels, banks, and airports co-exist with poor public housing, ancient deteriorated medinas, spreading haphazard housing, slums. These show clearly a dislocated society, a dependent economy and a dis-integrated culture.

Any attempt to improve this situation has to consider architectural education as a totalising enterprise for integrating very large societies in a modern style of life. Programs of training in schools of architecture should include not only the history is Islamic art, but also the history of Islamic thought combined with social and cultural anthropology. The past of Muslim society is very present and active, as I have shown, but only in the form of oppressive ideology. In the name of Islam, this ideology is imposing forms of architecture and shapes of urbanism which are relevant neither to Muslim tradition, nor to modern life and culture. The problem of privacy, for example, is all based on a legal status of women that is in strong opposition to the modern conception of human rights. This alienating vision and practice can be stopped only with a scientific knowledge of all the issues involved. In the meantime, architects should refuse to translate an alienating ideology into built forms, even when they are generously paid by kings, emirs and presidents.

I would even say that theological culture is a relevant topic for emancipating the architects and the users from imaginary representations of the past and its “religious” values, or from a positivist, functionalist conception of modernity. I say “theological culture”, not theology as a specialised discipline. How can one deal with any religious question without a theological culture? And, how can one establish a critical distance from modernity if traditional values are not objectively confronted with modernity?

What I am proposing here is new and far from the dominating trends of architectural education. If architecture is a free artistic creation, it does not need a systematic study of literary and historical descriptions. If it is a major activity engaging for long periods the relations of people to the landscape, the modes and ways of adapting the space to the individual and the collective existence, then architects, more than other professionals, should have a solid knowledge of all the determining aspects of human life. It seems to me that one of the most decisive problems in all Muslim countries today is the elimination of women from all public activities and the obligations put on them by law to devote their life to domestic tasks, when men keep a monopoly of all civil decisions and public activities. With such rigorous separation, archaic and traditional culture is kept and transmitted by women at home, while modern constraints, behaviours and performances are accepted and imposed outside. This is another psychological and even psychic rupture which governs the whole society; and there is no way other than theological culture or brutal revolution to deliver Muslim societies from this overwhelming contradiction. When architects from big firms accept to design in such ideological environments without any intellectual responsibility, because they are not aware of the issues at stake, they simply participate in strengthening for many years visions that are collectively alienating.

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture has been created precisely to face these historical problems in the Muslim world. How is it possible to insert modern thinking and technology in archaic and traditional societies? How is it possible to evaluate with a modern scientific approach — against all ideological and apologetic claims — the positive values of the Muslim Tradition to infuse it into our modernity? These are two constant, inseparable ideals of the Award. The originality of the Award is to master the past, the present and the future of Muslim societies through architecture and urbanism as integrated and integrating activities. This is at one and the same time a cultural and a political revolution with the greatest implications for a new civilisation.

Reference Notes

3 I am reporting here objections currently raised by “students” and ‘ulama after several lectures I gave in Muslim and Western universities.