

*Saad Eddin Ibrahim*

Ismail Serageldin has two quests as I understood it. One is to restore a sense of community in housing. The second, and this is related to the first quest — is to generate a healthy debate, in the hope that we can from this evolve a critical theory of architecture in general and a critical theory of Islamic architecture in particular.

My first comment is about the language of the discourse. In order to start an interdisciplinary debate between architects and other members of the social science family, there has to be a common language. The first requirement for a common language is to control our expressions. Ismail Serageldin in his pursuit of *Paradise Lost*, used some very strong, value-loaded words. For me as a sociologist and a social scientist, I wonder what they really mean. They have very appealing connotations and could mean different things to different people. Much of what he damned in architecture and design was made by other architects like himself. I wonder what they would say if they were giving a similar presentation, using similar or a different set of slides. So there is the question of value-loaded judgements among architects from the same culture. I am not talking about architects cross-culturally but from the same culture. This may mean that a consensus on aesthetic values will elude us.

Ismail Serageldin used words like degradation, dehumanisation, inhumane and rupture when elaborating upon his paper. These words could mean different things to different people. So, to conduct a healthy discourse, we need to know what these terms mean. I will take one example. He and Mohammed Arkoun talk about rupture and use slides to illustrate this concept. They show something completely different from the past; breaking sharply with the past. The example used really was showing me something else. It shows me cultural distortion. A picture, from an urban district, with modern Coca Cola or Pepsi Cola or Sony advertising really reflects not a rupture but a distortion, just like a Mosque with a small minaret or a small dome against a background of highrise housing. It is an example not of discontinuity but of a distorted continuity. The people are hanging on to something from the

past, yet trying to cope with the present or even with the future without losing that past.

In trying to do that, they may produce strange forms or what I call distorted forms, but definitely I would not call them cases of rupture.

My second remark has to do with the use of terms regarding housing *per se*. The word “shelter”, the word “house”, the word “home”, indicate different things. I was not sure exactly what they indicated in Ismail Serageldin’s presentation — these three words were used interchangeably, sometimes broadly with each time a different slant. From this I gather that “house” is a little bit more humane than “shelter” and “home” is a little more humane than “house” and furthermore “home” is a unit of a community as Ismail Serageldin would hope to recreate it or recapture it. I would agree with that, but I want to make sure that this upgrading from “shelter” to “house” to “home” is what he had in mind.

Overall, I found that the paper, the presentation and the slides were a helpful contribution to the two quests of Ismail Serageldin, except that there are three possible pitfalls.

The first pitfall is the “pitfall of nostalgia”. When he showed a slide from Mauritania — with a group of people carrying their shack from one site to another, he did not talk about the shack as a design. He actually used the slide to illustrate the spirit of the community. But you can not pick and choose. That is the package. The shack was the spirit of community, but maybe there is a trade-off. Maybe people are living in a poorer environment, in a simpler way, with less greed, with less ambitions and so on. Maybe there is a great deal of what we call community spirit. But he used the slide in a very selective way. He did not talk about how beautiful the house is from an architect’s point of view but he used it as an illustration of the collective self will — how people got together and move a house. It so happens that this is not just an image, of an integrated community but also one that is suffering from extreme poverty. Does he want to restore that community spirit, which seems to fascinate him in this Mauritanian environment, even if the price is to be extreme poverty? That is

a question. That is an example of a pitfall I found in the presentation, the “pitfall of nostalgia”.

The second pitfall is the “pitfall of eliticism”. Here we find that the houses that seem to have captured the imagination of Ismail Serageldin and all of us, and probably the AKAA Master Jury’s of previous years, seem to be elitist houses.

I know that one year that was not the case but most of the AKAA winners seem to be elitist. Only the rich can afford them. Ismail Serageldin faced that dilemma. In fact his whole philosophy was directed towards the poor in the dump, who are being monopolised or at least utilised or employed by the rich. I would not object to that line of argument because I think that part of the cultural distortion in some Muslim societies is due to the distortion of the upper class. In a few Muslim societies, the elite maintain an authentic house form. In Morocco for example, the Moroccan upper class have maintained a good deal of the authenticity of their houses and provide a continuity with the past. When they live like this, I think it should be commended, but nevertheless, we have to face the reality of the twentieth century and of the twenty-first century and that is the nature and the spirit of our age, a point that I would come to shortly.

The third pitfall that I found, is the “pitfall of relevance”. After Ismail Serageldin’s presentation and his slides, I keep asking myself, where does this really get us? Brilliant architects and thinkers, like Charles Correa, and Ismail Serageldin, have been dealing with these things for a number of years, ten years at least, and probably others have said all these things before in different words and expressions. Yet the ghost keeps pursuing Ismail Serageldin. The slab block building keeps multiplying, keeps coming back, and therefore what is the alternative? We have not yet had any model that could provide policy makers with an alternative. The bureaucrats are not without spirit, the policy makers are not without spirit. If they see something workable and economically implementable, they may be persuaded to do it. The absence of an alternative model to the things that are being criticised is a problem that we face.

That brings me to the second group of comments which have to do really with the “spirit” or “the nature of our age”. In order not to delude ourselves that we are able to recapture the Paradise Lost, we should face the nature of our age. There is a tendency, throughout the world, for standardisation.

Internationalisation, standardisation, the assembly line paradigm, the fast food paradigm, the hamburger paradise; it is spreading all over the world. I am using these as metaphors, not to be taken literally. You have an increase in the so-called middle class, the modern middle class, the new middle class, all over the world with an internationalised taste — an internationalised frame of reference, an internationalised value system. They may have their own peculiarities as Egyptians, as Indonesians, as Indians, as Chinese and so on but an increasing share of that package of values that the middle class is adopting is internationalised. Often it takes its clues from the mass media, through travelling, magazines, and all kinds of things. Moreover, our architects, our professors, our universities also share this movement toward internationalisation.

I am trying to find an answer, a reasonable answer to the world that pursues the slab block, the equivalent to the fast food in the food industry. Whilst the hamburger stands mushroom all over the world, whilst the blue jeans proliferate all over the world, there are a number of things that we as an older generation or a middle-aged generation, (we used to call ourselves the young generation until recently) have to face as reality, whether we like them or not.

I do not think that we will be successful in looking for something, to humanise our environment if we ignore that spirit of the twentieth century and twenty-first century.

If we take that as a reality we have to distinguish between, individualised needs and individualised taste because lurking in the back of this paper or in the background of Ismail Serageldin’s presentation is a confusion between individualised need and individualised taste.

If you take what I said about increasing internationalisation and increasing standardisation seriously, or if it is true at all, then I would say that one’s needs are partly organic but they are

also partly contrived. There is an hierarchy of needs. Somebody who is starving would not fuss about the kind of food you give him and likewise somebody who is in dire need of housing, is not going to fuss about the style or the aesthetic dimensions.

When do we begin to fuss about style? Once we fulfill the first layer, in the hierarchy? I definitely disagree with the quotation from Hassan Fathy. Can we escape his dictum that architects cannot provide generalised solutions to specific individualised needs? I think that is an inaccurate dictum. What the architect does and should do is to cater to needs that are not really individualised. There are common denominators in the needs of all mankind for certain basic things and housing is one of them.

When do we begin to individualise? I suggest when we move to the second layer of needs or the second desire — that is taste. So you can individualise style but you don't individualise needs. Otherwise ten times the resource of the world will not be sufficient to individualise needs.

My final remark is the question of community. One of the major questions that struck Ismail Serageldin and I fully empathise and share and support him is for the preservation of community spirit, wherever it exists and in restoring it whenever it is lacking. If we build housing projects or mass housing, we must as architects and social scientists and decision-makers take advantage of this massive opportunity to rebuild communities. But let us again control our use of the world community. What does the word mean? It literally means a territorially based group of people living together and cooperating in their actions together. That is the original meaning of the word community.

Can we do that in our modern complex life? Aside from company towns where people and housing are close to the place of work or in traditional communities, where you have craftsmen living very close to their work and where their place of residence and place of work may even be in the same structure, it is very hard to restore community — that is community defined as organic and territorially based; a group of people living together. What you can do is to bring many

features of community to any new housing project that we embark on. This is something that could be done. The restoration of community spirit — could be effected through certain designs. The collective courtyard or communal space in housing and mass housing projects could bring us closer because once you make a collective courtyard for every three or four or five apartments, then you are bringing back some elements of what used to create that symbolic community spirit in traditional cities or traditional towns.

I would like to end these remarks by a word about the architect. In every seminar like this we must, of course, look for a scapegoat. It looks like our scapegoat in this seminar is going to be the architect. All the examples that Ismail Serageldin showed of modern buildings are by architects. What type of architects are they? They are graduates of modern schools like the school he attended. Maybe they were schools of lower quality, but nevertheless they are architects and they seem to have enough of a reputation or renown to build these tremendous structures — so the question is as follows.

Is there a professional aesthetic code that architects must abide by and who is it made up by? It seems to me with my little knowledge of architecture, but with my connection with some architects, that architecture is one profession where art and science combine and to the extent that it is a science there are common rules and common ground and things that are common to any precise science. But to the extent that it is an art, there is a huge range of value differences and tastes.