

SPIRITUALITY AND ARCHITECTURE

Mohammed Arkoun

Architecture is 'built' meaning. It fatefully expresses who we are.

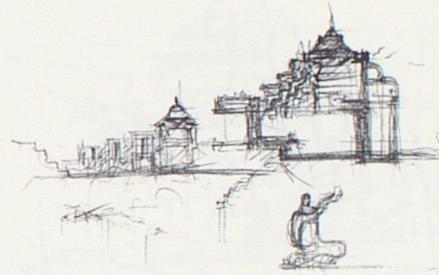
Charles Jencks

[Harmonious proportions] arouse, deep within us and beyond our sense, a resonance, a sort of sounding board which begins to vibrate. An indefinable trace of the Absolute which lies in the depth of our being. This sounding board which vibrates in us is our criterion of harmony. This is indeed the axis on which man is organised in perfect accord with nature and probably with the universe. Le Corbusier

They will ask you concerning the Spirit. Say to them, the Spirit (rūh) is from the Command of my Lord and of knowledge you have been vouchsafed but little. Koran 17, 85

The concept of spirituality is loaded with complex and different meanings; it is used loosely in contexts as different as religion, architecture, music, painting, literature, philosophy and alchemy, as well as in spiritualism, astrology, esoteric knowledge, et cetera. The quotations above refer to three different levels of conceptualisation. The first level is art and architectural criticism, which is supposed to make explicit, in a rational, analytical discourse, the 'harmonic proportions' inherent in the work of artists and architects, which emerges in the form of a poem, a picture, a symphony or a building. The second level is the lyrical-romantic expression of that which the artist-creator feels and projects into words whose connotations are more complex, abstract and speculative than those the work of art can actually convey to the observer or receiver (for example, a building of Le Corbusier does not necessarily possess all the resonance expressed in the above quotation). The third level is religious discourse, which has been transformed by generations of believers into a fountainhead, a source of spiritual experience projected on to the 'revealed word of God'.

In this article, I shall not consider the visions, conceptions, practices and discourses generated in spiritism, esoterism, astrology, theosophy and animism, although these psycho-cultural spheres of human manifestation interact in many ways with the undefined field of spirituality, which is more related to creative imagination, aesthetic works in different fields of the arts, and religious and transcendental values. Because these overlapping forces, notions, concepts,



spheres and fields converge in the meaning of the word *spirituality*, the efforts of art critics, philosophers, theologians, historians, anthropologists and psychoanalysts are essential to achieve precision and coherence in a matter which, until now, has been continuously confused.

As an historian of Islamic thought, I agree with the architectural critic who raises such problems as 'the power of a reigning paradigm' (although I would qualify reigning paradigms to those in a given language and for each language in successive periods). There is also a problem of words, such as 'the creative use of new languages' stemming from 'the developing story of cosmogenesis'.¹ These issues demonstrate the profound cultural gap and historical discrepancies that exist between Islamic and western contexts as regards the critical confrontation of spirituality and architecture.

I shall begin with basic assumptions about spirituality in Islamic tradition, and then identify a number of unperceived and therefore unthought of issues which are raised by so-called religious architecture and spiritual expressions in contemporary 'Islamic' contexts.

Glimpses into Spirituality in Islamic Tradition

In the series *World Spirituality*, Seyyed H Nasr edited two volumes devoted to Islamic spirituality: Volume I, *Foundations* (1987) and Volume II, *Manifestations* (1991). In these works, spirituality is presented as a purely religious quest originating with the Koran and the Prophetic Tradition (Hadith); rites are described in their 'inner meaning', and Sufism is named 'the inner dimension of Islam'. Reality itself is reinterpreted in the framework of this constructed spirituality; literature, thought, architecture and the arts are also annexed to this spirituality, which is actually a complex combination of subjective desires, hopes, and representations embodied in rites and words, and projected on to spaces, places, time, cultural works and so forth.

God, the angels, the cosmos and eschatological expectations are simultaneously both sources and objects of 'spiritual' contemplation, the initiators and ultimate references of the systems of values and beliefs transmitted and reproduced with devotion in each spiritual tradition. All individuals born and trained in such a tradition spontaneously share the inherited 'values' and psychological mechanisms of

spiritualisation, sacralisation, transcendentalisation of the profane, and the modest realities of their own environments. It is crucial to make a clear distinction here between spirituality, sacredness and transcendence as substantive values used in theology and classical metaphysics, and spiritualisation, sacralisation and transcendentalisation as the products of the agents of social, cultural and historical activities. This difference will become clear with the following example of the 'wrong' mosque.

This means that spirituality in all cultural traditions has not yet been analysed and reinterpreted with the new conceptual tools that were elaborated in the neurosciences to 'map' the spiritual functions of the brain. Thus, the history of spirituality has to be (re)written in light of this neuroscientific approach. Fundamentalist believers from all religions will immediately reject such a 'positivist' explanation. It is true that intellectual modernity has generated two competitive psychological postures of mind: the spiritualist attitude sticks to the mythical, metaphorical, lyrical cognitive system taught by traditional religions (as described in the *World Spirituality* series); the empirical scientific attitude does not negate spirituality and its various manifestations but aims to elucidate, as I have said, and to differentiate between spirituality, spiritualism, phantasmagoria, subjective arbitrary representations, theosophic constructions, et cetera.

This critical approach to spirituality is particularly absent in Islamic contexts today; political scientists and sociologists speak of the 'return of religion', the 'awakening of Islam', the struggle of an emotional, unthought spirituality opposed to 'western materialism and positivism'. Within these confusing ideological discourses, which are disguised with religious claims and vocabulary, great architects are commissioned to revitalise, restore and preserve 'Islamic' cities; to design 'Islamic' urban patterns, not only with select, often stereotypical 'Islamic' features, but also with mosques juxtaposed to – or inserted in – airports, universities, banks, hospitals, justice palaces, parliaments, factories, and so forth. Whether the architects themselves do or do not have an Islamic background is not a priority issue; what matters more is the content and the functions they give to spirituality in the present cognitive, anthropological mutations that are imposed upon the human condition. It is a well-documented



fact that many leading architects who endeavour to build mosques in 'the spirit of Islam' have neither a critical historical understanding of this difficult concept (ie, the spirit of Islam), nor an anthropological approach to what I have called the metamorphosis of the sacred.² Are the main components of the mosque – mihrab, minbar, minaret, courtyard, ablutions – intrinsically Islamic and therefore unchangeable through time and culture, or are they arbitrary forms and signs made orthodox by theological definitions, made sacred by collective ritual functions established over centuries? Islamic thought itself has not changed – intellectually, conceptually, politically, culturally – to any significant degree since the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. On this issue, let us consider two striking verses from the Koran:

And those who took a place of worship [*masjid*] out of opposition and disbelief, in order to generate dissent among the believers and to provide a place of ambush for those who warred against God and His messenger aforetime, they will surely swear: we purposed naught save good. God bears witness that they verily are liars.

Never stand there [for prayer]! A place for worship founded for piety from the first day is more worthy that you stand in it. Therein are men who love to purify themselves; God loves the purifiers. (9, 107-108)

These two verses clearly show how spiritual values, sacred places and religious truths which are considered to be absolute, intangible and ultimate references, are historically contingent and dictated by a violent confrontation between social and political groups of 'believers' still struggling for survival; the opposing group, called the 'warriors against God', founded a place for worship to compete with the same semiological tools used by the 'believers'. Potentially, at this point in the competition, either of the two groups could have won the confrontation and imposed its own semiological code as the transcendental, sacred, unalterable model for pious reproduction.

A Reappraisal of Religious Architecture

The 1995 Master Jury had long and fruitful deliberations on two mosques: the Great Mosque of Riyadh and Redevelopment of the Old City Centre of Riyadh, and the Mosque of the Grand National Assembly in Ankara. Rather than

proposing any kind of model to be followed, the Award has always aimed to encourage rich and much-needed debate on innovative solutions to changing situations and new challenges. The Jury felt that neither of the two considered mosques deserved an award purely for architectural merit; but both raised important problems related to religious architecture in two very different ideological contexts. The solutions proposed in each are clearly dictated by two polar stances toward Islam and secularism (*laïcité* in French).

In Riyadh, the mosque conforms strictly to traditional constraining models with all of the usual components; as in all heavily-financed mosques throughout the world, including Europe, religion is celebrated in architecture with large volumes, ostentatious luxury and sumptuous spaces, which suggest the will to power, material wealth and physical comfort, rather than a concern for aesthetic emotions, feelings of harmony and intimate peace, or the compulsion for spiritual contemplation. The architect of the Riyadh mosque is Muslim; he is certainly familiar with the ancient and recurrent opposition between *taqlid* (the strict reproduction of orthodox teachings in one of the recognised theological-juridical schools) and *ijtihad* (the personal intellectual endeavour to seek new, original solutions for new manifestations). Facing the task of building a mosque in an urban setting largely shaped by modern city planning and pompous modern buildings, is exactly the same as searching for a new definition of the 'personal status' (*al ahwâl al-shakhsiyya*) or expression of 'orthodox' forms, features and components of mosques; similarly, no theologian-jurist can introduce any change in the 'personal status' which is fixed by divine law.

How did the Turkish architect handle the same problem? Turkey is a secular (*laïque*) republic; the Grand National Assembly was created by Atatürk in 1923. Similar to the French Republican model, religious beliefs are private affairs, and control of public space is the monopoly of the state; these factors are why the commission for a mosque on the parliament premises could not be made by the Turkish deputies until 1984. The challenge is unique in the contemporary Muslim world, and we can easily imagine the enormous difficulties that the architect had to confront in order to build a mosque which looks more like a modest chapel, scaled down and hidden underground. The triumphant

Behruz Çinici, conceptual sketches for the Mosque of the Grand National Assembly, Ankara



minaret is suppressed, the mihrab opens on to a beautiful green garden; the main mosque components usually expected and demanded in a mosque are avoided or modified. Whether this *ijtihad* is a success or failure in architectural terms remains to be considered, but the posture of mind adopted by the architect to interpret – in a modern context – an old, venerable, semiological legacy deserves to be brought to attention and considered as an exceptional debate within the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, which, as an organisation, is a unique space for freedom: for free thinking, free expression, and free and constructive criticism which starts from and relies upon architecture, artistic creativity and spirituality, not on abstract, dogmatic, militant ideologies. It is obvious that the mosque in Riyadh aims to translate into an architectural vocabulary the orthodox theological statement that God's sovereignty supersedes any human claim to sovereignty, although the neo-traditional design of the mosque, its conservative style and the lavish materials fail to deliver an authentic spiritual message. The mosque of the Grand National Assembly does the opposite: it affirms the priority – but not necessarily the primacy – of people's sovereignty in a secular, democratic republic, and the privatisation of religious belief or God's sovereignty.

The 1995 Master Jury does not favour any one of these competing statements, but there is an urgent need to provide more examples, more potential solutions that can enhance criticism and cultural debate in the still poorly-explored field of architecture and the urban fabric. The contention is that architects, more efficiently than intellectuals and scholars, can resist the devastating violence generated by the confrontation of religion, state and society (*Dîn, Dunyâ, Dawla* – the three major concepts developed in classical Arabic thought) at a greater scale than all societies and cultures in history have achieved thus far. This means that all important architectural achievements contribute either to strengthening the dominant ideology in any given historical tradition and political order, or to creating a breakthrough in the inherited, imposed system of values and beliefs. In contemporary Islamic contexts, the second possibility still meets with many obstacles; the historical, intellectual and cultural gap between these contexts and those of western societies, where 'the jumping universe' is explored, thought about and

expressed simultaneously in all fields of human existence. This gap is widening, and is likely to increase even more in the next few years.

If, like other artistic expressions, architecture translates the main trends of the dominating cognitive system and cultural representations in a given tradition, we must recognise that the built environment in contemporary so-called Muslim societies is under the influence of a generalised ideological *bricolage*, which can also be described as a semantic disorder. High Tech images such as the Hajj airport terminal in Jeddah, the IBM tower in Kuala Lumpur or many other public buildings emerge among the more or less stereotypical 'traditional' city centres with their conventional mosques in redundant, populist or ostentatious styles and their monotonous social housing complexes and slums. The rift that has developed between the hard and the social sciences; between high technology and the quest for authenticity and identity; between the demands for modern, efficient economies and the dogmatic rigidity in 'moral', religious and juridical authorities that delay the emergence of citizens, individuals, civil society and patriarchal political systems perpetuating, in many cases, predatory states, must be analysed in order to explain why the quest for meaning has such a long way to go in combatting the wills to power. My contention is that the field of 'spirituality and architecture' is the richest, the more promising and most rewarding, where human desire for better life and affective, aesthetic environments can best achieve pluralist manifestations and optimal satisfaction.

Notes

- 1 Charles Jencks, *The Architecture of the Jumping Universe*, Academy Editions, London, 1995, p153.
- 2 *In The Mosque*, edited by Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, pp268-72.